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THE WORLD'S LEAST INTERESTING MASTER SWORDSMAN
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Chapter 1 — Searching for the Bull

Part 1 — The Main Act

Sansui, my dear apprentice. No doubt you already know just how proud I was of you when I sent you out into the world. You must be aware of the joy that I felt from having finally produced results, finally having made someone happy in my sinful existence. I could even feel an appreciation for the fact that I had been born.

Eckesachs, my old friend and companion. You're probably not aware that when I was reunited with you, not only did I feel happiness that we could settle our differences, but that mortals wanted to learn from my apprentice. I never imagined that having others share my ideals could bring that much joy. At that moment, I experienced contentment with my life, so much so that I felt able to pass away in peace.

Fukei, my fellow apprentice. I didn't know that you still lived. Your aura feels so corrupted. You've lost yourself in your hatred of me. It makes me want to die.

Saiga yelled out to those on Noah to run, then charged forward with Tahlan and Ran without waiting for a response, the three of them moving without hesitation toward the enemy: an invincible Immortal who had the power to control the heavens and the earth.

In response, Fukei prepared to counter them. While he had been overwhelmed in close combat, he was able to turn the tables on his opponents now that he had the advantage of distance. He began flinging the countless masses of earth he had torn out of the ground with his Art.

"World Manipulation, Ruination, the Abyss."

The three steeled themselves as they avoided the onslaught of dirt and stone, continuing their advance, but dodging the assault meant that they quickly became separated. The three also had their forward vision blocked by the continual barrage of earth hurtled in their direction.

Their forward movement required that they process so much: advancing toward Fukei, avoiding the holes in the terrain, and dodging the rocks thrown at them. With their concentration taken up by that effort, the three hadn't noticed that Fukei had started concentrating on activating another Art.

"Flash Step."

Fukei instantly closed the distance and drew back Vajra in preparation to strike. It was a simple, crude, but lethal bit of improvisation. The smallest bit of human ingenuity wielded by one who could control the heavens and earth. It was a skill that had been developed specifically to fight others who had such power.

Tahlan should have been able to respond to it, but he hadn't been able to react in time. It should have been simple for him to avoid, really; he could have used his duplicates to serve as decoys as he ran, or he could even have taken evasive action in the momentary pause after the Flash Step.

But having been fully immersed in the moment, and having lost his calm, he had lost himself in the act of advancing as he avoided the hail of earth. If he had been fighting Sansui, it would have simply resulted in a small jab to his ribs.

“You’re making yourself predictable by focusing on advancing.”

But his opponent now wasn’t the swordsman who was his teacher. Fukei was an enemy who was out for blood.

“Alas.”

He could have done more. Just that much more. That regret flashed in his mind as he prepared for death to claim him. Saiga and Ran had also noticed Fukei’s attack. But there was no way they could make it to him in time. Tahlan’s fate was now in the hands of the divine.

“Flash Step Art, Cowherd.”

And there was a god present.

“…!”

As he struck with Vajra, Fukei’s eyes went wide with surprise as Tahlan disappeared from before him. The blow that would have easily killed a human being was spent fruitlessly against empty air. Tahlan’s life hadn’t been figuratively snuffed out; he had literally vanished. Fukei looked around to see if Saiga had done something again, but both Saiga and Ran, who had been running toward him, had also vanished.

“…I apologize for being late.”

In the midst of his confusion, Fukei heard a very quiet voice sound out. It was in a tone he’d never heard before in his long life, but the voice itself still sounded familiar to him. When Fukei turned to face the voice, there were four people standing there.

Saiga, Tahlan, Ran, and one other.

“I’m sorry for getting you caught up in a spat between old men.”

A child was apologizing to the three who he had been fighting.

“…”

Fukei was struck mute by the sight. His fellow apprentice, the one who he had spent three thousand years trying to surpass, was apologizing to mere mortals. And it wasn't an apology just for show; Suiboku clearly meant every word.
"Master Suiboku."
Fukei heard a voice call his brother's name.
"Suiboku…"
"Y-You're…Suiboku…?!"
Tahlan, Eckesachs, even Ran, all could only say his name in shock. Their minds hadn't processed the sudden arrival of this unexpected ally. Just a heartbeat earlier they had been fighting for their lives, but with Suiboku's arrival, everything afflicting them had vanished. Their commitment, their anxiety, their fear, all gone. Even Fukei, who had come to kill Suiboku, felt confusion seep into the overwhelming hatred that had driven him.
"The moment I felt that familiar aura, using the Shifting Heavens mixed with Vajra's power, I knew what was happening. It's all upon me. Upon my crimes."
Suiboku looked upon Fukei with sadness.
"That Fukei would become a Fallen Immortal and still be alive…"
The brothers faced one another after a span of three thousand years. They had both changed. The younger brother looked like a child, the older as though he had aged. They look over one another, absorbing the differences.
"Master Suiboku, what's a Fallen Immortal…?"
"It's when an Immortal's ki is corrupted by being unable to accept their faults; rather than become younger, they begin to age… It's an illness suffered only by Immortals," Suiboku said, answering the mortal's question.
A fully fledged Immortal who had completely regained his youth and had completed his training…his fallen brother. The older brother, who had grown even older because of his illness, could only stare in confusion at his younger brother, one who had achieved the peak of the Immortal Arts.
"…It's all my fault."
Everyone present felt as though time itself had stopped. Everyone except Suiboku, who was the only one to act.
"Leave the rest to me," the man who had once been feared as a raging god said, in a voice that was almost too soft to hear.

Part 2 — Danger

The Arcana Kingdom's king and the heads of the Four Great Houses sat around the circular table. The five of them tried to appear unaffected as they sat in silence. While their general role in life was to give orders to others, there were few people who would listen to them under the current circumstances, and they had already taken all the measures that were available to them.
"It was just bad timing… No one is at fault here," Lord Sepaeda said.

It was hard to tell if he was offering a defense of himself. He couldn't help but think of the word "emergency" when he thought of the present moment. Perhaps he should have abandoned his pride, thrown aside any notions of saving face, and called Sansui back. It was possible that his own error in judgment could spell the end of the kingdom itself. The moody warrior stewed in that thought as he sat with his peers.
"Yet why does the wielder of the Divine Spear not destroy us? Just what is he after…?" Shouzo's liege, Lord Caputo, asked, finding the entire situation perplexing. The wielder of this divine disaster seemed to have something in mind other than the destruction of the Arcana Kingdom. That realization simply added to his confusion about the whole situation.
"In any case, we have no option but to trust in our aces. The most we can do is to discuss what we ought to do after this incident is finished…" the king tried to say, but his words simply rang hollow. It was a universal fact of human nature that speaking about what "ought" to be done rarely did much to move people to action.
"How pathetic."
The aces had all pledged themselves in the service to the men sitting in this room, despite the fact that they all wielded power given to them by God himself. In comparison to those men, the assembled lords were all too ordinary. With the clouds cutting off all sunlight to the kingdom, their thoughts were as gloomy as the skies themselves. It took all of their effort to avoid falling into a panicked despair.
"My lords, I bring news!"
A messenger suddenly appeared at the meeting. The messenger, a knight, had hurriedly rushed in, still disheveled from his hurried journey to the conference room.
"Master Shun Ukiyo has arrived from Disaea!"
"What? I ordered him to go straight to Caputo!"
Shun Ukiyo, the Thinking Man, was supposed to be on his way to Caputo. There was no reason for him to be here. The faces in the room clouded in confusion, one different from the troubled expressions they had worn earlier.
"I bring further news! The forest near the Royal Capital has vanished!"
The expressions of confusion changed yet again.
"There's evidently only a large crater where the forest had been… As though it had been carved out of the ground."
The knight giving the message himself appeared to believe that the end was nigh. Not only were the heavens obscured by heavy cloud cover, but an enormous tract of land had disappeared. Events that were far beyond the realm of what should be possible had happened in quick succession.
"…!"
But this news had a different meaning to the five sitting around the table. They knew who lived in those woods.

“…So the world’s most powerful man has made his move.” The king nodded in understanding as though he had been given a divine revelation.
The Berserker God, Suiboku, the man who had spent five hundred years training Sansui, the kingdom’s greatest swordsman… This swordsman of unimaginable power had somehow moved both himself and the forest he called home.
“It seems the situation is getting a bit clearer,” Lord Caputo said; as his words indicated, the confusion had vanished from the room. The news had restored a measure of calm.
“Bring my dear boy…Shun, Shun Ukiyo…to us.”
“Yes, my lord!”
The knight, reassured at the sight of the king and the Four Lords regaining their composure, saluted before he left the room. A few moments after the knight had left, a young man and an alluring woman entered.
“My lord, I, Shun Ukiyo, House Disaea’s Cleaner, have arrived as ordered.”
Only the young man bothered to introduce himself, as his companion glanced around the room in boredom. No one in the room even considered lecturing her for her insolence.
“Forgive my impure presence at such an august gathering.”
It wasn’t a statement for mere show; Shun appeared to sincerely believe he was unworthy of being here.
Everyone other than Lord Disaea was carefully sizing him up. Shun, who had never left Disaea’s lands until today, had finally appeared before the other lords.
“You can dispense with the pleasantries, my dear boy.”
There was no anger or panic in Lord Disaea’s voice. He addressed Shun in a tone that one would use when speaking to a particularly dear grandchild.
“I seem to recall ordering you to go to Caputo. What brings you here? Does it have something to do with Master Suiboku, the Sword Apostle’s master?”
“Ah, you’re aware of him.”
The youth known as the Thinking Man began to speak quite softly.
“As I was heading to Caputo under your orders, my lord, Master Suiboku appeared before me. It was around the time I began to see the clouds on the eastern horizon.”
Why had the world’s most powerful man appeared before Shun? Everyone in the room wanted to know the reason.
“According to him, the one wielding the storm clouds is one Fukei, his brother apprentice. Fukei’s goal is almost certainly to kill him, so he intends to deal with the matter personally.”
“So an Immortal stole Vajra from Domino and was heading for the forest where Master Suiboku lived?”
“Yes, that was what he said.”
The five nodded in understanding at Shun’s explanation and, at the same time, they realized the extent of the danger that Saiga and the others, who could very well be in the midst of battle, were in. Even Sansui, who had

trained for five hundred years, was a novice by Immortal standards. Fukei, who was probably even older than Suiboku, would likely be far more than Saiga and company could handle.
“Master Suiboku stated that he intends to take care of the matter himself?”
“Yes.”
“Then why did he appear before you?”
“According to Master Suiboku…” Shun’s voice had a tone of melancholy rather than excitement. “If I were to go fight, I would be able to kill Fukei.”
It appeared that Shun was unaffected by being told that he could kill an Immortal older than Suiboku.
“He had realized that I was on my way to face Master Fukei and came to ask me to leave the matter to him.”
In his melancholy, Shun appeared to pity Suiboku. He pitied and admired the Immortal who, after centuries of training, was now forced to confront, and possibly kill, a brother who now threatened the kingdom.
“He lowered his head to me and pleaded to let him handle it. Considering what he must be going through, I couldn’t say no.”
The young man who knew the value of honor thus apologized for his decision.
“I’m deeply sorry for going against your orders, my lord. I stand ready to accept any punishment.”
“It’s of no consequence. Thank you for bringing it to our attention.”
Lord Disaea and the others were truly grateful for the information. The five lords had been on the edge of despair just moments ago, but now they were celebrating that the situation was moving toward a resolution.
“In any case, I suppose we have nothing to worry about, considering the Sword Apostle’s master is on the case.”
“Say what? You seriously think that?” the hitherto silent woman suddenly blurted out in astonishment at the old man who had finally started to relax. Her incredulity was conveyed in a disrespectful tone that was completely unacceptable for use when addressing one of the Four Great Lords. Even the king wouldn’t use that tone with one of them.
“Hey, quiet.”
“Listen, Shun. These sunny-headed optimists need a dose of reality.”
However, she was beyond their ability to punish. Punishment, after all, was something that humans meted out on other humans. Divine treasures crafted by God were outside of the scope of such matters.
“Pandora.”
As Shun noted, she was Pandora, the Armor of Disaster, the bringer of destruction. Like the other Sacred Treasures, she was well acquainted with the Berserker God, Suiboku.
“That monster’s going to fight someone who’s got as much training as him. That’s enough to blast ten countries of this size off the face of this planet.”
“Really?”
“Really.”

Pandora was actually worried that this kingdom, and the ground it rested upon, would be completely annihilated.
“I mean, even two thousand years ago, Suiboku did things like sink entire continents under the sea. Now think of all the time he’s had to train since then.”
What was about to unfold wasn’t a battle between two swordsmen.
“By human standards, Immortals who wield the heavens and earth are basically gods.”
It was a clash of divinities, a battle beyond human reckoning.

Part 3 — Split

“Suiboku, someday... Someday, I will stop you...”
“Even if I must fall to your level, I will never forgive you!”
“I’ll catch up to you and make you regret your actions!”
“You’ll pay for your sins! Your barbarism! Your crimes against the Immortal Arts!”
“From today on, I live only to destroy you!”
“Master Suiboku.”
Looking at the man Saiga called Suiboku, Fukei and the Sacred Treasures, other than Eckesachs, couldn’t hide their confusion. The stereotypical Immortal who stood there showed no sign of the aggression that had characterized him in the past, and compared to Fukei, almost appeared invisible. His presence was so in tune with nature that, without a certain knowledge of his existence, they could very well have looked right at him and not noticed.
“I’m truly sorry.”
Suiboku made the three at his side, along with Eckesachs, levitate.
“World Manipulation, Mountain Throwing.”
Sansui was able to make anything he touched float, but he needed to remain in contact with the object to keep it aloft. Suiboku was able to levitate objects by touching them a single time. It was a gentle levitation, unlike the brute force method brought about by wind magic, and the four floated slowly upward like balloons.
“Suiboku!”
Trying and failing to resist the levitation, Eckesachs stretched out her hand toward Suiboku. As she did so, she looked at what Suiboku wore upon his hip. In the place where she had once been was a wooden sword much like the one carried by his apprentice, Sansui.
“Suiboku...”
Suiboku and Eckesachs had already split, then mended their relationship. Eckesachs knew that she would never fight at his side again.
Eckesachs and the three were set softly down upon Noah’s deck. Those who had been watching them fight from the ship’s railing hurriedly rushed over to check up on them.
“Are you alright?”

Paulette, a healer by training, checked them for injuries, starting with Tahlan. Unlike Ran and Saiga, who had the power to regenerate, even the smallest injury could end up impeding Tahlan down the line.
“…I’m fine.”
Despite being in a stunned daze, Tahlan still maintained his dignity. He had sunk into a sitting position on deck, but his expression was still one of regret.
“…I’m sorry, everyone. I let myself stop thinking in the midst of battle.”
Even if the opponent had been invincible, there was still something else he could have done. There was still a way for them to have made it through that situation. Yet, despite that, he had almost lost his life because of his own mistake. Despite having miraculously survived, he was caught up in regret at his own mistakes.
“To hold myself up as our representative and to make such a mistake… I feel only shame at my lack of training.”
Tears welled in his eyes at his sense of embarrassment. But as for those watching him, the members of the group who Tahlan had declared he had represented in the fight, they all shivered as they struggled to contain their emotions.
They had all taken Sansui as their master and respected him like a father. At the same time, they had also simply assumed that Tahlan was the first among them. The prince of a foreign land, wielder of the Rare Art of Shadow Summoning, the handsome man who had promised his future to Douve. They knew just how different he was from the rest of them, yet they still considered him to be the epitome of what they strove to be. That he shared that belief, that he considered himself to be one of them, meant more to them than they could have ever imagined.
“…I’m also ashamed.”
Saiga, who no longer held the legendary sword, pressed his hands against his cheeks.
“I had the legendary sword, I’m the heir to House Batterabbe, and I was the strongest of us three. Yet, even so, I didn’t even try to protect Tahlan. If Master Suiboku hadn’t arrived, Tahlan would have been… Even though I could have, should have, been able to do something…”
He was ashamed that despite all his talents, despite his privilege, he wasn’t able to bring about results worthy of those things.
“And…I felt relief when I saw Master Suiboku. Relief that I wouldn’t have to fight anymore.”
Ran had also wordlessly sunk down to the deck. While her hair was still silver, the fight had been sapped from her. She had been so aggressive, so eager to fight when they had the advantage, but when help arrived after the tables had turned, she had lost all the spirit she had shown earlier.
It was an embarrassing amount of immaturity bordering on mental weakness. They were the very image of a trio of beaten dogs.

“I said I’d fight as the heir to House Batterabbe, but...in the end, I left it all in Master Suiboku’s hands...”
Fortunately, it appeared that none of them had any injuries worth mentioning. Their wounds were all emotional and mental. They were simply sapped of their will to fight.
The Arcanians all felt sympathy for the three, seeing them in their beaten state, the proud three having been brought low by emotional wounds.
“Hey, Happine, Douve. Prop up Saiga and Tahlan, will you?”
The one who pulled them out of their depression was Ukyou, the leader of the Domino Republic. Despite the fact that he had lost his Divine Spear and had been reduced to a mere spectator, he still tried to encourage the demoralized group before him.
“At the very least, we should bear witness. No matter what happens.”
Two Immortal brothers who had been reunited for the first time in an unimaginable span of time... As those who happened to be at the place and time of their reunion, they had a responsibility to see what they were about to do.
“I mean, that’s about the only thing we can do now.”
The only thing they could do was watch. Even so, Ukyou urged the beaten warriors to stand. That was the only thing Ukyou could do, but it was also something that only happened because of Ukyou’s presence.
In response to Ukyou’s words, Happine helped Saiga up, while Douve did the same with Tahlan. With some effort, the young women got the men they loved to stand.
“Can you stand?”
“...Yeah.”
Sunae had done the same with Ran, offering her a hand. Ordinarily, in her excited state, Ran would have erupted in rage at such a gesture. However, even the touchy Ran was so emotionally worn out that she needed help to stand.
“Everyone up? Well, then...”
Ukyou then looked down at the battlefield.

There he saw a confused Fukei and a calm Suiboku, devoid of any aggression. Based on their appearance, it certainly didn't seem like they were going to start fighting.
"Hehehe... So, he really has become a proper Immortal!"
Elixir seemed quite pleased, but the others didn't share her mood.
"I-Is that really Suiboku…? Seems like a completely different person…"
Noah trembled at the complete lack of aggression in Suiboku. Sure, she had expected Suiboku to have matured a bit, given that he had raised an apprentice like Sansui, but even then, there were limits. Suiboku had simply changed far too much from the man she had seen in the past.
But if the Sacred Treasures were confused, Fukei was absolutely dumbstruck.
"Suiboku… Is that you?" Fukei finally spoke his name.
"First time in three thousand years, Brother," Suiboku answered sadly. "I know what you've come to do."
Suiboku drew the wooden sword from his sash, but he hadn't taken up a stance. He sat upon the ground with his legs folded under him. Suiboku laid the wooden sword in front of his knees, the front edge facing him, then lowered his head to Fukei.
"I'll happily give you my life, Brother."
It was a sign of surrender, a show of no resistance. The sinner who awaited judgment, driven by his conscience, offered himself up for punishment.
"Come, take my head."
There was no need for any Immortal Arts or swordsmanship. Suiboku had placed his life in Fukei's hands.
"…"
Fukei's mind went completely blank at the unbelievable sight unfolding before him. While his thoughts had stopped, a torrent of emotion came flooding out of his heart. A torrent of pure, unadulterated rage.
"How dare you."
The moment Fukei put words to his emotions, he understood the root of his anger.
"How dare you!"
He directed all of his fury at the man prostrated before him.
"How dare you!"
The heavens rumbled. Lightning flashed and thunder crashed behind him. The wind, the clouds, the lightning, all of it whipped up into a frenzy.
"How dare you!"
Everything around him expressed the sheer fury roiling in his heart.
"How dare you!" Fukei screamed in despair. His voice cracked as though he would burst out in tears at any moment.
"...How cruel."
Dáinsleif pitied Fukei, and she wasn't the only one. The others looked upon Fukei with the same pity. Fukei must have expended an enormous amount of effort in order to be strong enough to kill Suiboku. But in the end, it

turned out that there was no need for strength, no need for power, to accomplish that task.
If Fukei's motivation for killing Suiboku had been mere justice, a killing that came from necessity rather than human malice, perhaps it wouldn't have been a problem. But there was far too much of the mortal, frail human in Fukei as he continued to scream "how dare you!"
Fukei needed Suiboku to be evil. Not just evil, but an unforgivable, great evil. Suiboku needed to be an obstacle so great that Fukei could only overcome him by throwing everything he had acquired in his nearly eternal lifetime. Yes, Fukei wanted revenge. Because it was revenge that drove him, he needed victory. To simply take Suiboku's proffered head was unacceptable. That wasn't what Fukei had been seeking for so long.
"Fight me!" Fukei screamed in the desperate hope that his days had not been in vain.
"Fight me!"
His words raged in the face of an essential contradiction. If the only reason he had sought power was to win, then there was no need to despair at a situation where there was no need for strength to obtain victory. Strength was a means, not an end, after all. The important thing was accomplishing the goal. Even if the preparations had been wasted, that wasn't that important an issue as just achieving the end. But Fukei was far too human to be able to simply consider the situation with that sort of cold logic.
"…My friend, my brother."
Suiboku refused to fight, even as he understood what drove Fukei's scream.
"Can it not be avoided?"
"It can't! Never!"
In the silence that followed, everyone waited for Suiboku's response. The seconds felt like hours as Suiboku wrestled with his emotions. But in the end, there was only one possible answer.
"I see."
Suiboku raised his head. He closed his eyes and thought back to his crimes. He grieved. He had matured and grown since those days. Yet he still had to do the same thing he had done then. As he grieved, he picked up his wooden sword and stood.
"Medicinal Arts — Golden Balm...!"
Suiboku's body began to grow noticeably larger. He went from having the form of a child to that of a young adult. He grew as though from a seedling to a tree, remaking his body into one suited for fighting.
Seeing that, Fukei felt a jumble of emotions. Reassurance. Joy. Hatred. He felt pleasure that he would finally be able to unleash the strength he had spent an eternity acquiring, and hatred toward the enemy he had despised for so long.
"Fukei-Style Immortal Arts! Ki Collection: Ultimate Technique! Mother of the Great Chariot! Dragon Reincarnation!"

Fukei gripped Vajra so tightly that the haft of the spear squealed in protest, even as its wielder dropped into a stance and anchored himself firmly on the ground.
The air around him swirled, groaned, and burst. Fukei's mental state manifested in the world around him. Those aboard Noah now came to the full realization that Fukei hadn't been anywhere near serious until that moment, that Fukei was only now just showing his true power.
"...It's the same," Noah murmured as she carried the mortals upon her. Fukei was almost identical to the Suiboku who had been known as the Berserker God. The possibility should have been obvious, given that they had trained in the same school, but it was still unbelievable. That there would be someone as powerful as Suiboku was something that no one could have ever imagined. No one could have believed that there would be a second god of destruction, a god of violence that could completely trample upon all of creation.
"Your life, your training, your Ultimate Technique... I'll answer that with my own Ultimate Technique."
Seeing his own past appear in the form of his brother, Suiboku steeled himself. The ultimate power that he obtained over the long four thousand years of his life... He felt the pull of fate at the fact that his brother, his fellow apprentice, would be the one he would employ it against for the first time.
"Suiboku-Style Immortal Arts. Art of War: Ultimate Technique. Ten Bulls of Enlightenment. Tenth Stage of Enlightenment. First Truth of the Immortal Sword's Self-Salvation."
Suiboku prepared to fight with everything he knew.
"State of No Doubt."

Part 4 — Trifling With

The two Immortals faced off against one another. The intensity of Fukei's aura was enough to make those on Noah's deck feel as if they were outdoors in a storm. By contrast, Suiboku, the target of their gaze, was oddly without a noticeable presence or aura. Given that he had bowed and offered his head to Fukei just a few moments before, the observers could be forgiven for thinking that he intended to stand there and be killed.
"Graah!"
But Fukei, facing off against him, didn't share that illusion. Having known Suiboku from the time before they were Immortals, he had no doubts about his enemy's intentions now that the younger man had taken up a stance with his wooden sword. Despite feeling no trace of aggression, intimidation, or killing intent, he knew that Suiboku intended to fight. To take down that opponent and kill him: That was what Fukei had prepared for over the last three millennia.
But that was also why the elder Immortal felt a certain amount of suspicion. Suiboku and Fukei belonged to the same school of the Immortal Arts and

thus possessed ki. That made the difference in their weaponry that much more pronounced. Even if Vajra hadn't been created to serve as a fighting tool, Suiboku himself only carried a wooden sword. If the two were to clash with their weapons, the wooden sword would be destroyed immediately and Suiboku would be cleft in twain soon after.

He intends to defeat me without a single exchange of blows!

Properly recognizing Suiboku's intent, Fukei felt a fresh surge of anger.

"…!"

Fukei thus leapt forward as though he had been shot out of a cannon.

"…!"

With a silent shout, he lashed out with Vajra. It was a technique that combined Strengthen Self, Quicken Self, and Leaden Step. Even Ran struggled to follow the movements, as they used the full extent of Fukei's power, explosive speed, and agility.

Just how would Suiboku deal with an attack that was too fast and powerful to stop?

"…!"

Suiboku released his wooden sword with his left hand and instead set it upon its side. He relaxed his knees, sunk his hips down, and sat with his back straightened.

Suiboku's first move was to sit down. The wooden sword that should have been protecting him was resting on his lap.

Whoosh!

Fukei's blow cut through the air over Suiboku's head; Suiboku had quietly avoided Fukei's attack.

But Fukei wasn't one to be impressed by the ease of Suiboku's defense, and he immediately moved to his next attack. He swept Vajra in a low arc. Ordinarily, this would have been a blow intended to cut out the opponent's legs out from under them, but against a sitting opponent, it would be a finishing blow that would split their torso in two.

Yet once again the spear cut empty air. Not only was there no corpse where Vajra had swept, there was no sign of Suiboku himself. Fukei thought that Suiboku had simply vanished.

"Ki Wave Technique, Collapsing Fist."

Suiboku, who had been standing upon Vajra's haft, brought down his ki-infused fist in an unexpected blow to the head. Even Fukei, an unkillable Immortal, was stunned for a few moments.

Suiboku wasn't one to miss such an opportunity. He had already drawn back with the wooden sword in his right hand. The blow then landed upon Fukei's undefended face…and that wasn't the end of his attack.

"Ki Blade Technique, Prayer Beads."

The wooden sword that had destroyed Fukei's front teeth and lips then stuck to Fukei's skin as though it were coated in adhesive. It was a weak enough grip, one that could be broken with enough resistance. Fukei could have peeled it off if he'd had a moment's opportunity.

But Suiboku used that grip as a fulcrum and pulled the wooden sword. With the weapon stuck to Fukei's face, it was only natural that the action would pull Suiboku's floating body toward Fukei.
"Guh!"
Suiboku grabbed Fukei's head and brought his knee into his enemy's face. The blow broke his nose and robbed him of his vision.
"Ki Blade Technique, Hair Nail."
The hand that had grabbed Fukei's head now kept its hair in its grasp. Suiboku then imbued ki into that hand, abruptly hardening Fukei's hair into needles.
"Inner Body Technique, Quicken Self."
For just a moment, Suiboku accelerated his body's movements.
"Needle Puncturing Technique, Thread Cutter."
He then fired the needle-sharp hairs into every pressure point in Fukei's body. This perfected technique, one that combined lightning speed and pinpoint precision, robbed Fukei's body of its freedom faster than Fukei could regain his senses.
"Guh...ah...?"
Fukei's mind couldn't keep up with what was happening. His brain simply wasn't functioning properly to keep up with the situation. Moreover, it was also the sudden variety of attacks directed at him, along with intense pain from his broken teeth, torn lips, broken nose, blurry eyes... All contributed to prevent him from processing the information that came from his senses.
"Inner Body Technique, Leaden Body... Ki Blade."
In the brief moment that Fukei fell forward, Suiboku had drawn up his sword in an upward swing. He then brought down the wooden sword in a great downward cut, adding his whole body weight plus the additional weight from his Immortal technique, landing the accumulated power of the blow onto the back of Fukei's unprotected head.
"Mm."
With just that sound, Suiboku briefly stopped his attacks. Fukei's head was buried in the ground, and that held his body in place. His body twitched, and it didn't appear that he would get up again.
"...Huh?"
Fukei, as the recipient of the attacks, probably couldn't have seen all of it, but those watching from above had witnessed the entire series of attacks. They didn't understand the precise mechanisms behind each technique, but they understood that Suiboku had overwhelmed Fukei without giving him an opportunity to reply. There was no hesitation or pause. They were dumbfounded by the utter lack of remorse.
"Is it already over?"
The impressive display looked like it had been choreographed. Meanwhile, Douve had voiced everyone's thoughts; they all thought the fight was done.
"He's overwhelming..."

It was a display that even stunned Eckesachs in its ferocious one-sidedness. An opponent that Tahlan, Ran, and Saiga had barely defeated combining their abilities... Suiboku had taken him down in the space of an eyeblink. It was an action worthy of being called “godlike.”
“...Mmph.”
The one who had accomplished that feat looked down upon his opponent, who was still partially buried in the ground. Suiboku wasn’t looking down at Fukei in a figurative sense, merely observing him from above. His expression was one of intense disappointment, intense regret.
“It’s not over yet.”
Suiboku’s words were too soft to reach those on Noah’s deck far above him, but the Arcanians on Noah felt the rush of intense ki that followed that statement.
“Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!”
An immense amount of ki burst forth from Fukei’s body as it lay half-planted in the ground. The flow was intense enough to whip up the air around it, ruffling Suiboku’s hair and clothing as he stood nearby.
“Grrraaaaahh!”
It was a wild scream, one unworthy of an Immortal. The rage from tasting humiliation, along with a mouthful of dirt, manifested in Fukei’s voice. At the same time, the intensity of his ki flow was steady. Fukei almost felt a sense of relief from the hatred he felt toward Suiboku.
“Suiboku...!”
Picking himself up, Fukei stared at his brother, who made no attempt to flee. His expression of intense rage, bordering on a feral grin, had a tinge of glee in it.
“Fukei.”
“Suiboku!”
Calling out one another’s names at close range, the brothers knew that the battle was going to continue.
“Yes, that’s how it should be!”
The way Suiboku had treated the elder brother he’d encountered for the first time in three thousand years, the way he had treated the man he had offered his life to... The sheer barbarity of the attacks Suiboku had leveled against Fukei was exactly the sort of brutality that Fukei expected of the man he knew so well.
“That’s how my foolish brother, my hated enemy, should be!”
Which is why he felt relief. The three thousand years he had spent training to defeat this demon hadn’t been in vain. Had he neglected his training even in the slightest, no doubt he would have been killed.
“Now I will kill you!”
Once again, he held Vajra over his head.
“Mm,” Suiboku responded to his brother without either counter-attacking or dodging, as Fukei made clear his intention to continue fighting.
“Hah!”

“Flash Step!”
Suiboku avoided the quick strike with the briefest of Flash Steps. Although ordinarily his Flash Step could carry him far off toward the horizon, Suiboku had only moved enough that Vajra just barely missed his nose.
“Graaah!”
Suiboku dodged Fukei’s follow-up attacks with a series of Flash Steps. As Fukei stepped in with each attack, Suiboku read the paths of each attack ahead of time and moved just enough to barely avoid the blow.
The continuous series of Flash Steps, the precise observation skills that read Fukei’s attacks, and the nerve to wait until the last moment to dodge... These were all worthy of admiration. Even the briefest of delays, the smallest misjudged distance, would have resulted in Suiboku’s death. Yet despite the fact that he repeated the sequence multiple times, Suiboku was unerring in his technique.
Flash Step can be used this rapidly in succession?! Impossible!
It was precisely because he wielded the same Art that Fukei was caught so thoroughly by surprise. But Suiboku wasn’t the only one who had a large repertoire of techniques at his disposal. Suiboku wasn’t the only one with centuries of experience.
No, there’s nothing unusual about Suiboku being capable of doing this. All I need to do is make him regret underestimating me and focusing on using those little Flash Steps!
Spears were weapons with long hafts. Not only did those hafts give them a substantial amount of reach, but it was also possible for the wielder to adjust their engagement range. Changing the location of one’s grip could, on its own, throw off an opponent’s entire read.
But there’s no way Suiboku would miss his read in physical combat.
If he were that susceptible to bluffs, Suiboku wouldn’t have chosen this method of defense. He clearly had the confidence that he could see through such a simplistic ploy.
I’ll increase my speed, then! I’ll step in further!
He needed to either make his attacks too fast for Suiboku’s Flash Step to dodge, or otherwise make Suiboku misread his timing. Fukei knew he could do both by increasing the speed of his lunge.
“Ki Wave Technique, Quivering Feet!”
Fukei released a wave of ki from the soles of his feet, which pushed off the ground and launched him forward. With a propulsive burst strong enough to carve a crater into the ground, Fukei lunged deeply at Suiboku.
“Ki Wave Technique, Quivering Feet!”
At the exact same moment, Suiboku’s sword thrust landed against Fukei’s solar plexus.
“Ahh...!”
Suiboku’s thrust stabbed right through Fukei’s charge, and Fukei took the full force of both his own and Suiboku’s Quivering Feet in his solar plexus.

Even if he was protecting himself with Harden Self, there was no way he could withstand that blow.
I-Impossible!
Fukei was the one who had misread the distance and thus hadn't been able to respond in time.
If I hadn't used my Quivering Feet, he would have been in danger! How could he have seen that coming?! Why didn't he waver in his read?!
Caught completely on the back foot, Fukei couldn't keep up with the current situation. There was no way that Suiboku would miss both the physical and mental opening that Fukei had left open in that moment.
"Leaden Body."
Suiboku then proceeded to land a heavy swing on Fukei's head.
"Gah... Graaaah..."
As Fukei reeled, Suiboku prepared another swing, but Fukei had already healed the wound in his midsection.
I could handle his students, but...I can't beat him up close. I need to get some distance!
Fukei attempted to jump backward to open some space between himself and his foe.
"Inner Body Technique, Feather Step! Ki Wave Technique, Quivering Feet!"
He lightened his heavy body and let loose a ki wave from his feet, flying backward.
"Inner Body Technique, Quicken Body. Ki Wave Technique, Quivering Feet. Ki Blade Technique, Prayer Beads."
With his blow already prepared, Suiboku struck Fukei without delay even as Fukei launched himself away. It goes without saying that it is faster to leap forward than to move backward. Fukei was therefore unable to avoid Suiboku's attack, and Suiboku's wooden sword was now stuck to his leg.
What's happening?! How is he reading me so completely?! Why does he always have the perfect response?!
By all rights, Fukei should be stronger, yet nothing he did was working. Everything he tried was countered immediately by Suiboku.
But there's no issue if it's merely my leg! Prayer Beads will do nothing!
Fukei's limbs were tough enough not to break easily beneath a wooden sword's blows. Even if his leg was to break, that injury would immediately heal. More than anything, unlike a blow to the head, it didn't interrupt his own techniques.
"Ki..."
"Leaden Body."
Just as Fukei tried to remove the Prayer Beads-attached sword from his leg with a ki wave, Suiboku moved first with a Leaden Body. The technique canceled Fukei's Feather Step and returned his body weight to normal. As such, he was no longer buoyant.
"Guh!"

Fukei landed on his back, without being able to prepare for the impact, but that wasn't enough to cow him.
"Such a trifling attack...!"
Suiboku released his Prayer Beads before Fukei could recover and opened a slight distance between them. Just that simple precaution was enough to disrupt the timing of Fukei's counterattack.
"Phew..."
Suiboku steadied his breathing and drew in ki from his surroundings. He was trying to recover some of the energy he had expended in the battle, but those expenditures had been fairly minor. Rather than being in serious need of recovery, it seemed he was simply trying to refresh himself physically.
Distance. I need distance. That comes first.
On his knees, Fukei chose to use his Flash Step to widen the gap rather than stand. He focused his attention and read the auras around him. He then identified where he wanted to move.
"Flash..."
"Flash Step."
The split second before Fukei's own technique fired, Suiboku vanished, his wooden sword readied.
"...Step."
And despite having moved a long distance, Fukei found himself face to face with Suiboku, who had already started his downswing.
"Gaaah!"
The blow to the side of his head was enough to throw Fukei into sheer confusion.
Impossible... He read where I was going?! He grasped where I was going with my Flash Step then moved with his own Flash Step before I arrived?! That's impossible!
The pain had caused Fukei so much mental discord precisely because it had broken in on his intense concentration.
Now's not the time to think of that! I need to get distance from him!
Like Suiboku, Fukei also had an enormous amount of combat experience. He wasn't such a fool that he was going to spend time thinking while the enemy was landing blows on him.
"Raaaaaah!"
Fukei released a ki wave from his entire body. It wasn't a particularly powerful attack, but it was one that would always land so long as his opponent was close enough. It was an attack born out of desperation.
But Suiboku had easily moved backward, just outside the attack's effective range.
Again, he avoided it...
Fukei no longer had the will left to be surprised. No doubt Suiboku had simply stepped away with a Feather Step immediately after he had hit Fukei.
Calm down... Calm is what I need.

Fukei had been given plenty of opportunities to taste the sheer threat posed by Suiboku over the course of this short battle. Now he needed to analyze that threat and formulate the tactics necessary to defeat it.

I'm faster, stronger, and tougher. I have more ki and my weapon is superior. Given that, why is Suiboku the one landing the blows? Is it because his Flash Step is so quick? No... Everything he does is quicker, true, but it's simply that he's moving first.

To put it simply, he was dancing to Suiboku's tune. Fukei had a proper grasp of the situation and was taking all the appropriate actions. However, Suiboku was reading all of Fukei's actions before they happened and, each and every time, taking the appropriate counter-move to disrupt his plans.

I'm losing the battle of wits... He has such nerve. A single mistake would cost him his life.

Any one of Suiboku's actions would lead to death if it failed. To be able to make those moves without hesitation and execute them without failing even once showed an incredibly impressive level of skill.

So he can fully execute every counterattack and preemptive attack. Then...there's a way to deal with that.

Up until that point, Suiboku had continually handed the initiative to Fukei. It was frighteningly impressive that he could continually control the battle even while ceding the first move to Fukei each time, but there was another way to think about the situation.

I simply need to hand the initiative to Suiboku. Given that I am both faster and tougher, I should be able to respond in time.

Both counterattacks and preemptive attacks have one weakness — beyond the sheer risk associated with failure and their inherent difficulty, that is — they simply don't function if the opponent has no intention of attacking first. In that sense, both maneuvers required waiting for the opponent to attack.

Meaning I simply need to focus on responding. It will mean a stalemate if Suiboku chooses not to attack, but surely Suiboku can't stand to sit around and wait.

Fukei fully yielded the lead to Suiboku. He dropped into a deeper stance, in order to watch Suiboku's every action, and was ready to attack immediately if Suiboku was to use a Flash Step.

Attack me, Suiboku. Surely you won't cower and settle for not attacking.

It was a kind of faith: Fukei had no doubt that Suiboku would attack. He was certain that Suiboku would lunge forward, right into Fukei's perfect defensive stance. That faith was what gave him the peace of mind to wait.

"Ki Wave Technique, Quivering Feet!"

Naturally, Suiboku repaid that faith with his response. No, more than paying it back, he far exceeded that faith. Drawing his wooden sword high above his head, Suiboku quickly closed the long distance between the two with his Quivering Feet.

Foolish!

A lunging swing from a distance wasn’t an attack that a swordsman should attempt against a spearman. No matter how fast the lunge, the distance allowed the spearman to gauge the right timing for a counterattack. With his superior reach, Fukei had an overwhelming advantage.
“Grah!”
A sideways sweep of Vajra welcomed the lunging Suiboku. Having perfectly timed the attack, the blow should have connected.
“Feather Step.”
However, Suiboku had stopped his movement in mid-air. Suiboku, who was supposed to be bursting forward in a lunge, used his Feather Step to stop in mid-air without touching the ground.
“Whaaat?!”
Fukei’s blow swept through empty air. It meant that Fukei’s stance was now completely open.
He baited me!
Fukei, who had swung Vajra with a speed and strength far exceeding a normal man, was left vulnerable for enough time that even a normal man could respond. He had leaned forward, his foot outstretched, and no longer was able to balance properly.
“Quicken Body.”
Having stopped in mid-air with his sword held over his head, Suiboku resumed his movements just outside of Vajra’s effective reach. He lowered his wooden sword into a middle stance, stepped in, and then lunged forward. A counterattack, directed against the counterattack that Fukei had sought. The tip of Suiboku’s wooden sword landed directly against Fukei’s throat.
“Gruh…”
Immortals can’t suffocate, even when surrounded by flames or water. However, a crushed throat both disrupted the flow of their ki and the natural rhythms of their breathing. Taking that opening, Suiboku once again stepped back and opened some distance between himself and Fukei.
Does he intend to attack again? Pointless. The same thing won’t work twice. I need only wait until he steps in further before I attack.
Fukei checked his throat as it healed and once again dropped into a defensive stance. He focused intently on his opponent in front of him, in order to catch even the subtlest movement.
And it was in the midst of that concentration that he noticed something amiss.
Where is his sword?!
The wooden sword. No matter how insufficient, it had been Suiboku’s only weapon. It was no longer in Suiboku’s hands. He had been holding it when he struck Fukei’s throat. It meant that he had let go of it in the moment when Fukei had been recovering from his throat wound.
Then where did it…!
The answer came immediately.

“World Manipulation, Mountain Throwing.”
The wooden sword, which had been floating above Fukei came down with enormous force upon Fukei’s exposed pate.
“Gaaah!”
The tip of the wooden sword sunk deeply into Fukei’s skull, destroying what was within and immediately disabling Fukei’s body.
“Flash Step Art, Cowherd.”
With the added weight from the technique gone and now back to its original density, the wooden sword wobbled and fell from Fukei’s head. Suiboku used his Flash Step Art to pull it back into his hand, then swung it to flick the blood off. Fukei’s gore splashed along an arc on the ground.
“Mm.”
Still breathing steadily, Suiboku watched Fukei carefully. Though his body had collapsed to the ground, the wound on Fukei’s head was already rapidly healing. Despite the fact that he had recovered and healed from countless lethal wounds, Fukei’s ki reserve and healing abilities seemed nowhere near their limit.
“Hard to believe that he’s truly unkillable.”
Despite having thoroughly battered the brother he had offered his life to, Suiboku realized with a pang of sadness that his brutality had been in vain. And Fukei, who had been utterly overwhelmed by the younger brother he had come to slay, stood up without a trace of fear.
“Have you realized the futility of what you do, Suiboku?”
Suiboku had, in fact, been able to overwhelm Fukei without suffering so much as a scratch. But, even so, the Fukei who stood in front of him didn’t have a wound upon him.
“I’m fully aware that you’re strong. I’m also well aware that I can’t overcome you in combat.”
The man who had yet to give up on anything readied Vajra once more.
“But I’m here because I know those things. I’m here because, in spite of all that, I can kill you.”
In the three thousand years since Suiboku had destroyed their homeland, Fukei had trained and trained for this very moment. No matter how strong Suiboku had become, he would claw and fight his way to victory. That had been the entire reason he had acquired his unkillable body.
“No matter how often you manage the best response to my actions, you cannot destroy this body!”
Fukei slammed Vajra’s butt into the ground with an Earth Manipulation technique that far exceeded what should have been possible. The earth itself deformed and began to change.
“You’re absorbing the power of the earth into your body…!”
“Indeed! That is why I am without limit! My enlightenment is not simply invincibility! It also means that any land is as familiar to me as my own, and it obeys my will!”

Moving a large amount of land required an appropriate amount of preparation. That was true of an ordinary Immortal, and it was true of Suiboku. However, Fukei's unique Immortal Art had made the impossible possible.
"And I wield the Divine Spear! As such, this entire planet is your enemy!"
The master of the heavens and the earth, in complete control and invincible. With that power in his hands, Fukei stood before Suiboku.
"There is not a single thing left that you can do!"
Suiboku, with his wooden sword in hand, looked sadly upon Fukei.
"To beat me, despite knowing my strength. To be unkillable, despite my best responses... I see."
Suiboku pitied Fukei.
"You've drawn the wrong conclusion, Brother."
Despite grasping the heavens and the earth, Fukei still didn't understand himself or his opponent.
The world's strongest man looked upon the man he had warped and felt nothing but guilt.

Part 5 — Heaven and Earth

Everyone upon Noah's deck, including the three that had been fighting Fukei until a short while ago, held their breath as they watched the battle unfold below.
Ukyou broke the silence with a murmur.
"...Glad I didn't try to keep him in Domino."
It was true that the Domino Republic, as Arcana's vassal state, had pushed the problem onto their overlord. Even with that knowledge, Ukyou made clear he valued his country's safety above all else. The statement indicated a clear lack of scruples, but no one seemed to care about that at the moment.
Suiboku, whose skill with the blade had reached the rarefied heights of near divinity, had proven that he was undoubtedly Sansui's master. Despite Fukei having dedicated a similar amount of time to the art of battle, Suiboku was vastly superior to his erstwhile brother apprentice. Suiboku constantly looked upward, toward the next step. He was the very essence of a warrior, the divine ideal of a swordsman that Sansui had likewise epitomized.
But Fukei held his own. Facing off against a god of war, essentially a ridiculous hypothetical ideal made flesh, Fukei clung to a semblance of parity with an unkillable body and an unbreakable spirit.
There was no way that Ran, who had constantly been driven by her passions, could have done anything but kneel in defeat at the feet of Sansui, who was the personification of calm, collected logic. There were many others aboard Noah who had fought Sansui and lost, which was why they understood just how difficult it was to continue trying to challenge him.

Nothing was more demoralizing, more shattering to one's soul than to face an enemy that you could do nothing against. The fight itself rendered all of one's training meaningless and crushed one's sense of self.
"An invincibility that he had acquired for this day, for this moment," Dáinsleif murmured to herself.
Fukei hadn't obtained an invincible body to be able to defeat all comers. He had sought to become invincible, so that he wouldn't lose, no matter how thoroughly Suiboku battered him. Had he not put in that effort, he would have been disabled after the first attack and that would have been the end of the battle.
"So, now it seems that Fukei is just getting started. Suiboku can't control the heavens or the earth, so how will he deal with him, I wonder!" Elixir, who watched the battle with amusement, was focused upon Suiboku's movements.
"Huh? Suiboku can't just manipulate the heavens and earth himself?" Saiga asked Elixir.
Given that Suiboku and Fukei were both Immortals, their most powerful techniques must be those that manipulated the heavens and earth. Wasn't the coming battle going to be a clash between those techniques?
"No, he can't! All of you, look over there!"
Everyone had been focused upon the battle between Suiboku and Fukei, but they turned around when Elixir made her observation. The dark cloud cover limited their line of sight, but behind them was the fortified city at the edge of the Caputo territories. Just above it was an enormous landmass, large enough to effectively serve as a lid for the city.
"Wha?!" Paulette, the heir to House Caputo, stuttered out in shock.
It was understandable, given that it was as though a giant mountain had suddenly appeared behind them. But not all of them were overwhelmed by surprise. Tahlan, noting the size of the forest, guessed at its provenance.
"…Could that be the forest that Master Suiboku calls home?"
The heavens and the earth had been turned on their heads in two or three different meanings of the phrase, but the land above the city was, in fact, Suiboku's forest. Suiboku had lifted the earth, forest and all, out of the ground itself, and turned it over to make a shelter for the city. The layers of earth that were ordinarily buried deep underground now faced upward, while the trees of the forest were turned downward. Immortals were capable of manipulating gravity, of course, but the mortals couldn't understand just how Suiboku manipulated so much gravity as to place the forest there.
"Wait… Is he doing that to protect the city?"
Shouzo, who boasted the greatest amount of raw firepower among the aces, suddenly felt small and insignificant. Despite the fact that he had yet to discover the limits of his own mana, he couldn't imagine he'd ever be able to levitate a forest of this size and keep it in the air.

At the same time, Shouzo was moved by Suiboku's thoughtfulness. The elder Immortal was using the woods, lands he could wield as though they were his own hands and feet, to protect the people of the city below. In effect, he was using one unnatural disaster to avert another unnatural disaster. It was an epic battle, this clash of Immortals, but because Suiboku was using the lands under his dominion to protect others, he had stripped himself of his own defenses.

"Suiboku has no intention of losing... He fully intends to win."

As Eckesachs observed, Suiboku was willing to offer up his life, but he had no intention of losing in battle. That was clear based on having watched him fight Fukei up to that point. Suiboku intended to defeat an Immortal who manipulated the heavens and earth without doing the same himself; that was something that should, by all measures, be impossible. At the very least, it was impossible for Saiga and the others. No doubt Suiboku would use techniques based on principles that mere mortals couldn't grasp, and thereby secure an overwhelming victory.

And yet, because the principles behind the Arts employed were beyond their grasp, those mortals couldn't help but feel an uncertain mixture of hope and anxiety. It was as Fukei had imagined and as Sansui had noted: Just as Sansui could die if a blow connected, the same was true of Suiboku.

"...Hey, hold on a sec," Noah, the Ark, said as though she had finally realized something. "Are you guys planning...to stay here?"

Noah combined an extremely durable hull with a barrier fueled by the strength of her passengers' desire to live. The Sacred Treasure had been created to withstand natural disasters and thus remained a safe sanctuary even under these circumstances. However, Suiboku was the man who had once destroyed that Sacred Treasure. As such, Noah wanted to avoid being caught in a clash between Suiboku and an Immortal of equal power at all costs.

"Hahahah! You'll have to do your best!"

Elixir offered her encouragement, but there was nothing Noah could gain from it.

"Danua, heeeellllllp!"

Even if Noah's interior was safe, she had to use her body to protect everyone aboard. Everyone other than Noah was determined to see out the end of this clash between these forces of nature, but the one who would suffer the consequences of that determination, was Noah, the only one who didn't want to be here. And of course, Noah had no choice in the matter.

I know you're a prodigy when it comes to the martial arts! I'm well aware of that! Which is why I have prepared up until this very day to defeat you, prodigious talent and all!

Fukei knew that Suiboku was strong. He had sworn to defeat him in spite of that knowledge and spent three thousand years in preparation. Of course, he wasn't pleased at having been thoroughly outmatched in mortal skills, but he still had other methods by which he could achieve victory. If

anything, for an Immortal, the clash of techniques that moved heaven and earth would always be the actual meat of the battle.
Fukei-Style Immortal Arts, Ki Collection: Ultimate Technique, Mother of the Great Chariot, Dragon Reincarnation.
The technique basically had three effects: The wielder gained a limitless amount of ki, became unkillable, and was granted the ability to use large-scale Earth Manipulation techniques in lands the wielder had only just visited for the first time. Techniques that manipulated the heavens and earth required several hundred years to master properly, but they also required decades to prepare before use. They were most effective in lands where the wielder had trained and thus knew well, but Fukei, who had mastered Ki Collection, didn't have that limitation.
Suiboku had brought the lands he had spent the last fifteen hundred years training in, but he had already used them to shield the city. As such, Fukei had a massive advantage over his opponent.
More than anything, I also have Vajra. She will strengthen my Shifting Heavens techniques and let me overwhelm Suiboku.
And yet, Fukei couldn't feel absolute certainty about his victory.
It would be different if he wielded Eckesachs, but even that wouldn't change the fact that I have the advantage!
Conflicting ideas clashed in his head.
But as things stand now, he won't be able to resist. Does he intend to not use Eckesachs, even under these circumstances? Does he intend to simply offer up his life to me as he did earlier? No, he's not that noble! Is he simply mocking me?! The wretch!
Suiboku simply quietly gazed upon Fukei.
Does he intend to interrupt my techniques like the mortals did earlier? It's not impossible, but would Suiboku bother with such a thing?
Suiboku's calm unnerved Fukei. There was none of the aggression, none of the passion that Suiboku had once wielded, but his calm, almost invisible presence still had a solid foundation beneath it. No matter how Fukei attacked, it seemed a wasted effort. Fukei would be the one who would be hurt. He even felt for a moment that it would be better for him to apologize or to flee rather than face him. These were the same emotions felt by the swordsmen who faced Sansui.
Absurd!
But there was no possibility that Fukei could ever flee. He had spent far too much time, far too much effort, to back down now.
I cannot defeat my opponent without believing in myself!
The Suiboku that stood before him or all of the training that he had done up to this very day? It was up to Fukei to decide which bore more weight.
"Shifting Heavens Art, Bugbear!"
Fukei used Vajra to move the heavens and giant storm clouds fell from the sky like boulders. It sounds absurd when described like that, but it was actually happening. Pieces had come loose from the omnipresent cloud

cover and were now rapidly falling toward the ground. It was enough to make the observers wonder if the clouds themselves had turned to stone.
“Earth Manipulation Art, Subterranean Path.”
Suiboku commanded the earth below his feet and the hardened ground swallowed him as though it had suddenly turned to mud. A moment later, the storm clouds came screaming down from the skies, landing with enormous weight and force, crushing the earth beneath them. Having dived deep beneath the ground, Suiboku had escaped unscathed and he lay quietly in wait.
Noah, who had been caught up in the area of effect of Fukei’s attack, resisted the weight of the clouds with her protective barrier. Fukei’s technique ultimately ended up not doing any damage to anyone there.
“As I expected!”
But Fukei had anticipated that possibility. The Subterranean Path was the most basic of techniques related to Earth Manipulation, and it was a perfectly reasonable method to avoid an attack that utilized the weather. That was exactly why Fukei had taken measures against that use of Earth Manipulation.
The frightening reality was that Fukei had dropped storm clouds from the sky as a mere feint. With his unlimited store of ki, Fukei controlled the entirety of the ground around him. As such, he was able to locate where Suiboku had fled underground, then force the ground around him to lift his opponent upward.
“There’s no escape for you now!”
Fukei lifted Suiboku and the soil around him upward. It was a massive expanse of land, equivalent to a small mountain. The sheer scope served as a remarkable and rare display of Earth Manipulation, but for Fukei, it was merely a way to prevent Suiboku from dodging his attacks with Flash Step.
“Fukei-Style Immortal Arts, Shifting Heavens, Ultimate Technique: Pangu — Chaos Upon Heavens and Earth!”
Winds whipped up by Vajra and Fukei’s Arts begin to eat away at the levitating pile of earth. No matter the extent of Suiboku’s talent, the laws governing the Immortal Arts made it impossible to use Flash Step while encased in earth. The cage of howling wind quickly ate away at the floating landmass, leaving no openings large enough for a human to pass through. With no place to run, Suiboku would soon be at the mercy of the cutting winds.
“I won’t let you go! I won’t even let you speak! I’ll just grind you to dust!”
Fukei still sensed Suiboku’s location through his presence. He was definitely inside the landmass that he had hewed out of the ground. It wasn’t a decoy or a false presence: Suiboku himself was there. If things continued in this fashion, Fukei would most certainly be able to kill his enemy. The ultimate combination that Fukei had spent three thousand years perfecting was now about to kill his ancient rival.

“Once I catch you in the wind, it’ll cut you to pieces! Even if you try to extend your life with a Divine Ginseng, I’ll destroy you so thoroughly that you’ll never regenerate in time!”
To defeat Suiboku, Fukei first had to land a blow upon him. That was a challenge that took an eternity to solve and a challenge that seemed nearly out of reach.
In the past, I was only able to land two or three blows over the span of a thousand years. But that’s different now!
Fukei had spent three thousand years to get to this moment.
“So, what will you do?! What can you do, Suiboku?!”
Victory was in sight. Suiboku’s death was near. The end was almost here. Fukei was upon the cusp of accomplishing the great feat that he had spent ages — no, an eternity — chasing. He had been able to put himself into a position where he could kill the hated Suiboku with ease.
No, something was wrong. There was no way Suiboku would die like this. Fukei had spent centuries perfecting the tactics he was certain would kill Suiboku, but even so, he felt a prickle of doubt in his mind.
“So, what will you do?! What will you do?!”
Fukei’s expression was not the confident expression of a man certain of victory, but rather one anxious about the efficacy of the technique he had developed.
“Now that you’re in this state, you have no chance!”
Fukei continued to fight against the image of Suiboku in his mind as he maintained the “state” that would lead to his victory. It was a death trap, a place with no escape; there was no way that Suiboku could break free. Or so it was supposed to be.
“Fukei...”
Submerged in the soil, Suiboku was encased in darkness. Suiboku, whose mind was focused upon his elder brother, was so deep in his thoughts that the howling noise growing ever louder did little to disturb him in the darkness.
“I’m sorry... I really am sorry...”
Just as Fukei had detected Suiboku within the earth, Suiboku felt Fukei’s presence outside. Suiboku felt the sheer instability, the anxiety, roiling within Fukei.
“It’s all my fault... That you have changed so much, that you have fallen... That is my sin.”
Fukei had been swallowed by his obsession and had lost himself. No, rather...Fukei had turned his back upon how he ought to be.
“Oh... Oh...”
Fukei pretended not to see what he could see, pretended not to hear what he could hear, pretended not to notice what he noticed. It was Suiboku who had made him into that man. If Fukei had never been involved with Suiboku, he would never have become so lost. Despite having mastered the art of

battle and becoming a true Immortal, Suiboku couldn't begin to grasp how he could heal Fukei's broken psyche.
"I've still got a long way to go..."
As the earth absorbed his tears, Suiboku called upon an Immortal Art.
"Earth Manipulation Art, Harden Earth."
It was a simple technique. It hardened soil and turned it into stone. Nothing to it.
"Hahahaha! Harden Earth?! That's it?! It's too late, Suiboku, much too late! There's no way you can make a boulder large enough to stop the wind at this point! It's much too late for you!"
The words Suiboku murmured were buried by the dirt, swallowed by the gale, and never reached Fukei's ears. But as Suiboku used his Art within the diminishing clump of earth, Fukei had felt the stones forming within. It made sense, of course. Stone was harder to destroy than dirt. But that would only delay the inevitable.
The Immortal Arts could not create something out of nothing. While they could turn existing dirt into stone, it couldn't suddenly turn that stone into steel or create more earth from nothing. Even if Suiboku compressed the dirt into stone to protect himself, it would only buy him a few extra minutes, maybe just a few extra seconds.
"Accept it. You'll die without ever seeing the sun again!"
"I don't have any objection to you killing me."
They weren't having a conversation, but Suiboku could feel Fukei from within the soil. Suiboku grasped what Fukei was thinking.
"But I don't intend to fool you."
Suiboku was faithful to his principles. Suiboku had decided to fight. In making that decision, he had decisively set aside the option of letting Fukei kill him. If that hadn't been the case, he would have let Fukei slay him during their earlier exchange.
As he had chosen to fight, Suiboku intended to do his best, no matter how much Fukei would end up regretting the outcome. Given that, the fact was that the current situation posed no danger to Suiboku.
The current situation was a position that had been created by someone's hand. That meant there was a logic to it and an intent behind it. Even if this situation had been crafted with the help of a Sacred Treasure and formed with an unbelievable amount of ki, it still had to follow the laws of nature.
Suiboku understood that Fukei had spent three thousand years looking for a way to kill him. He spent those years in a constant search for ways for an Immortal to kill another Immortal. Suiboku respected Fukei's obsession, his dedication, and he truly knew that it was something he couldn't ever have done.
At the same time, Suiboku also had a profound grasp of the Immortal Arts. He had never considered how he could defeat another Immortal, but he had sought more methods to kill using the Immortal Arts. Among those methods,

there had been techniques like the one Fukei was currently using. As such, Suiboku knew how to overcome that method.
“My friend, you’re missing something. As for what…”
Suiboku created multiple rocks as he lay buried in the soil. But he wasn’t creating those rocks around himself, but rather far away from his location, on the outer edge of the clump of earth. He was preparing the stones, not to defend himself, but to attack.
“…There are far too many things to name.”
Suiboku unleashed a ki wave from inside the dirt. Unlike Flash Step, a ki wave still moved through soil. In fact, the soil was a better medium than the air. Several rocks were pushed outward by the ki wave, launching outward like bullets.
“Fukei, you may think you have the heavens in your grasp, but…you were the one who taught me that the concept was mere hubris…”
To grind away at a mass of earth in this fashion required using a wall of wind as a method of attack. Both magic and the Immortal Arts had methods of using wind as a defensive wall. In both cases, the walls weren’t used to directly stop incoming attacks. They were, instead, limited to slowing an opponent’s attacks or changing their direction. Strong winds could cause an arrow to lose velocity or to be deflected from its target. But the wind couldn’t suddenly stop an arrow in mid-flight, nor could it send one back in the direction it had come from.
“The last gasp of a drowning man!”
Fukei had noticed the stone bullets that had escaped the cage of gale-force wind. He had noticed them and chose to ignore them. Fukei and Suiboku were both able to observe where the other was located. That also meant they were capable of targeting the other. But the winds that were eating away at the dirt also changed the trajectory of the rocks as they were launched. Surely they wouldn’t hit the target that they had been aimed at.
“There’s no way such things would… Gah?!”
“You’re the one who’s drowning… You’re the one who’s gasping.”
Wind created by Vajra or the Immortal Arts, unlike wind created by magic, was still natural wind. As such, Suiboku could easily read it. Even from within the soil, Suiboku could predict the flow of the wind.
“You spent so long on this attack that it was easy to figure out where and how fast to launch the rocks to hit you.”
A stone about half the size of a person’s head slammed into the side of Fukei’s head. It was a completely unexpected blow. Had Suiboku launched several stones and corrected their courses to try to attack him, Fukei might have felt that they posed a threat. If Suiboku had launched numerous stones all at once, he might have considered that at least one would likely hit him. But Fukei hadn’t believed it possible for the very first stone to hit him directly in the face.
“I-Impossible… Gu-Guuuh!”

Even more absurd was the fact that the rocks Suiboku had launched, seemingly at random, all connected with Fukei, striking his face, his knees, his stomach. It was impossible. It was unfair.
“Spending time on something doesn’t necessarily make it better. That’s something you taught me.”
Fukei was unkillable, but he still flinched when struck by an attack. If he was wielding an Art, the attack would still interrupt it. The technique he used to levitate the ground had continued, but the wind cage had died out with the first stone’s impact. With the storm gone, Suiboku casually emerged from the soil.
“You also taught me not to jump to easy conclusions, and to never forget to observe the nature around me.”
Suiboku didn’t hurriedly leap to the ground, instead floating downward slowly, defenselessly.
The words had come far too late, but Suiboku still spoke them as he looked sadly upon his brother, “When I had hit a wall and was wallowing in despair, what came to mind were your admonitions. It took me over a thousand years after our split to understand just how valuable your tutelage was. Since then, I’ve always remembered you and your words of wisdom. It’s thanks to you that I am who I am today.”
The words of thanks, though sincere, sounded hollow and sarcastic. It was far too late, but Suiboku still wanted to express his thanks.
“I taught my apprentice the things that I learned from you. I guess that’s why my apprentice has become a model Immortal… I really have nothing but gratitude for you…”
“Suiboku… Suiboku! Suiboku!”
Fukei slowly regained the consciousness that had threatened to slip away. His wounds had healed and he had returned to the fight, but the form that he had developed to secure Suiboku’s death had been defeated. The technique that Fukei had believed would secure him victory, the Ultimate Technique that he had perfected over centuries… Suiboku had only needed to see it once to defeat it. Suiboku had easily defeated it without much effort, without ever being in any danger.
“You… You’ve always been that sort of man!”
“You haven’t changed either. You’re still such a serious man at heart.”
Fukei was enraged. The man he flung all his hatred at only responded with a look of sadness and pity. Despite having shown his intent to kill him, Suiboku had simply let Fukei’s intent slide. The technique that had been named for a god had been defeated by a technique named for enlightenment.
“I had always…”
As Suiboku slowly floated downward, Fukei flung a blade of air toward him that had no hope of hitting him. Even Fukei didn’t believe that the blow he had unleashed with all-consuming hatred would actually hit its target. Fukei intended to see how Suiboku responded before taking his next step.

Would Suiboku escape upward with the wind, or would he accelerate his fall using Leaden Body, or would he change his position and defend on the spot? As Fukei intended to corner Suiboku based upon his next movement, Suiboku suddenly vanished from his line of sight.
“Impossible… Flash Step in mid-air?! Is it not just a Shroud Technique?!”
“I can’t use a Flash Step from within the earth, but…I can use Flash Step in mid-air now.”
“The mountain echo technique?! Show yourself!”
Even Immortals were, at heart, still human. While they had their own unique sense — the ability to read auras — they were still primarily dependent on their vision. That was particularly true in combat, and Fukei was no different. Like any mortal, if the opponent he was tracking by sight was to suddenly disappear, he’d naturally lose track of them.
“No matter how much strength one obtains, it needs to be wielded rightly. You always taught me that there was nothing greater than being right.”
“You… How dare you say that! You, who have always overcome any attempts to correct your behavior, your actions, with brute force!”
Humans tend to neglect their peripheral vision when looking into the distance. The same was true when they were focused on a particular object or task. It was always difficult to maintain a broad view. When engaging in a conversation, people often stop hearing other sounds because they’re focused on listening and speaking. It usually took a particularly loud noise to jar them out of that focus.
The same was true of detecting auras. The more engaged or lost in emotion the aura reader was, especially in combat, the less precise their ability to detect another’s presence. Once they completely lost an opponent in the battlefield, it was difficult to sweep a wide area in order to reacquire that target.
“Which was why I wanted to become like you!”
Fukei was well aware of that fact. If Suiboku wanted to hide, it would be next to impossible to find him. Which was why Fukei put himself on alert for Suiboku’s approach. He abandoned his attempt to find Suiboku and waited instead for an attack. It was a humiliation that he had felt quite often three thousand years ago.
“That brings back memories. I used to mock you by peeing on you when you lost sight of me, didn’t I… No, I’m really sorry. I guess I really did romanticize my memories of you… There’s just so much I need to apologize for…”
Suiboku was ashamed that he could only think of things that would anger his opponent as he tried to reminisce about their past. Because Suiboku was using the Mountain Echo technique to speak to him from afar, Fukei had no idea where Suiboku was.
“I spent a thousand years with you… That’s a thousand years of accumulated anger and offenses… I suppose there’s far too much there to make up for it with a few apologies or even just my head…”

“Silence!”
“It seems like you want to beat me…to defeat me by fighting me with all your might… But I can’t let that happen. Nothing really goes as we want it to, does it…?”
“…!”
Fukei knew he couldn’t panic. He needed to be calm. This wasn’t the first time Suiboku had toyed with him. Three thousand years ago, Suiboku had often gone out of his way to torment him like this.
“…”
Fukei tried to calm himself, but the calm wouldn’t come. Had it been anyone else, he would have been able to withstand the mockery, but there was no way he could stay calm when Suiboku was taunting him.
Just as Suiboku himself had mentioned, Fukei had an enormous pent-up hatred for his rival. Although Fukei had used that hatred to drive himself during his training, that hatred also kept him from calming himself now that Suiboku was tormenting him once again. The countless barbarous abuses that his hated brother apprentice had perpetrated now played back in Fukei’s head.
Yes, even in the past…
“No, could it be?!”
Had Fukei not been so focused on “finding” Suiboku, he might have noticed earlier. The observers looking down from Noah were all focused upon Suiboku lurking above Fukei’s head. Had Fukei not been so narrowly focused, perhaps he could have read where their attention was. Perhaps…
“I used to step on your head a lot, didn’t I?”
When Fukei looked upward, he saw Suiboku standing on one hand.

“For a moment I got sentimental and wanted to step on you, but then I thought better of it…”
As Fukei gazed up at the sky, Suiboku’s hand rested lightly upon the top of Fukei’s head. Although Suiboku had been lurking above Fukei, in his brother apprentice’s blindspot, he seemed unconcerned at the fact that Fukei had found him.
“Though, in the end, I’ve disrespected you again.”
“You…”
“I’m sorry.”
Suiboku maintained his grip on Fukei’s head and switched his Feather Step to a Leaden Step. Fukei continually had Leaden Body activated, and the result of adding Suiboku’s Leaden Step upon Fukei’s head was easy to see. A sudden weight upon his head as he bent to look upward. Although Fukei’s head was still attached to his body, it then slammed into the ground.
“I’ll accept death if you want to kill me as punishment or as revenge… But I can’t let you win this fight.”
The head that Suiboku had in his grasp had been crushed like a ripe fruit. Fukei had fallen backward with his feet still planted on the ground, his back arched unnaturally. The damage to his head began to heal rapidly.
“You’ve gotten stronger, but you’re also wrong. I won’t lose to strength born of error.”
Suiboku had let go of Fukei’s crushed face before it began to heal, standing upright and finally settling back on to the ground.
“You’ve made a mistake, and you’re operating under a misunderstanding. That is why…you can’t win.”

Part 6 — Basics

“Master Kacho! Why won’t you chastise Suiboku for going to learn under another Immortal?!”
“Mm.”
“That brat just wants to learn the Arts the Immortals of this region have mastered! That’s all he’s after!”
“Mm.”
“And think of the sheer amount of evil he could do with such power! Surely you can imagine what might happen!”
“Indeed. No doubt that boy will do exactly what you fear.”
“Then why don’t you chastise him?! To not do so is evil! It’s unforgivable!”
“…”
“There’s still time. We can stop him here!”
“No, we can’t stop him. He was born to that fate.”
“No, that’s not true. Suiboku is still unskilled!”
“…You’re lacking in training. Indeed, I…I worry more about you than Suiboku, Fukei.”
“Master Kacho?!”

“You’re too focused on that boy, and you’re far too caught up with the laws of the mortal world.”
“I-I’m simply worried about the boy… Including the possibility he’ll cause problems in the world. I…!”
“Such presumption… Your concern with others rather than your own affairs shows your lack of training. Immortals need not concern themselves with concepts like good or evil. Do you intend to kill every wolf, murder every tiger, and exterminate every shark, turn all the woods and plains into farmland, and work tirelessly for the benefit of the mortals?”
“Th-That’s an extreme argument! We Immortals seek harmony with nature…”
“Then what is nature? What lies outside of nature? What is harmony?”
“…My apologies, Master, but I do not know yet.”
“No, no, that’s where you’re wrong. Fukei, my apprentice, your problem is not that you don’t understand *yet*. It’s that, if you continue as you are, you will *never* understand.”
“What does that…?”
“You worry about others, you point out the failings of others, and then you try to correct them. That puts you much further from enlightenment than the likes of Suiboku. You’re not even trying to find the answers.”
“You mean to say that Suiboku will eventually find the answer while I will not?! Why?! What must I do?!”
“Forget about Suiboku. Set aside your concern, give up on preventing the destruction, the slaughter, the recklessness, the evil, the sins, and the great crimes that Suiboku will commit. Forget about Suiboku. Ignore him and focus upon your own training.”
“I…can’t forget about that! I can’t accept it, nor can I forgive him!”
“You’ve made the interests of mortal society into your justification. As such, you haven’t been able to leave the mortal world behind. Those things show that you’re far from being an Immortal.”
“No… That’s not true!”
“Be honest with yourself. Cry out in frustration from the pit of your stomach. You’re not capable of that, are you? That’s why you can’t accept what it is you truly want. That is why you can’t accept, give up, or forgive.”
“…”
“There are clouds that become storms and clouds that do not. There are also clouds that simply dissipate and vanish.”
“Does that refer to me?”
“Yes. You need to look upon yourself. Focus inward, upon your own self. Accept the failings of your shallow, ugly self. That’s what you need to do now. If you don’t, then your end will be…tragic beyond words. You will die regretting that your long life was filled with suffering. You will end by denying the worth of your own life. I…I pity the fact that such a fate might await you. Fukei, my apprentice, I worry about you.”

Fukei had grasped the heavens and the earth. In terms of physical strength, he was also vastly superior to Suiboku. He had directed all of that strength against a single individual. And yet, in spite of all that, Fukei had yet to land a single blow upon his target.
In which case, he would focus first and foremost upon hitting his opponent. Fukei's next technique would be one that was difficult to avoid.
"Shifting Heavens Art, Rain Barrage!"
Fukei levitated gravel high into the air. There, the gravel mixed with rain and began to fall as a shower of projectiles. Even if each missile was just a small pebble, if all of them were literally falling like rain onto the ground, there was no way to avoid them. Furthermore, with the constant rainfall, even Suiboku couldn't use Flash Step.
"Mm."
In the brief space between Fukei's activation of the technique and the cascade of watery gravel, Suiboku had used his Flash Step.
"Foolish! Too soon!"
Suiboku had moved right into Fukei's reach. While he was too close in to reach with his spear, Fukei had used the Rain Barrage knowing Suiboku's response. That was why he released his dominant arm from Vajra and tried to land a palm blow against Suiboku.
"Ki Wa— Gah!"
But before his attack could connect, countless attacks rained down upon Fukei's body.
"W-Was this...Cowherd?!"
"Sorry..."
Suiboku hadn't used a standard Flash Step to move, but rather he had used the more advanced technique that drew in the opponent, Flash Step — Cowherd. Ordinarily there was no effective difference, as it would simply close the distance between the two, but in this case Suiboku had used it to draw Fukei into the Rain Barrage. Essentially, Suiboku was using Fukei as an umbrella to shelter against the falling gravel.
"Gugaaaaah!"
"I really do...wonder at my own tactics..."
Fukei was pummeled from above by his own Rain Barrage pellets, while from below, Suiboku repeatedly fired small ki waves into him to hold him in place. Regardless of whether Fukei was using Harden Self, there was no way that mere gravel could pierce a human body. Though Fukei felt the continuous sting of the pebbles raining down on him, none of the pebbles went through his body to kill Suiboku. Fukei's body had thus ended up protecting Suiboku from the Rain Barrage.
"Grr... Graaaaah!"
"Mm."
As the Rain Barrage ended, Suiboku backed away from Fukei. A heartbeat later, Fukei's spear cut through the air harmlessly.
"Shifting Heavens! Great Hail!"

“Fukei… So, you’ll take yourself down to get me.”
Fukei’s response to Suiboku’s method of defense was simple. If Suiboku intended to use Fukei as a shelter, then Fukei need only use an attack that his own body couldn’t withstand. He created countless giant pieces of hail, each large enough to crush him, in the clouds above, bringing them down in a torrent.
“Rather sloppy…”
“Hrmph, say what you will. It’s a tactic that works because I’m unkillable!”
Even in the face of a technique that would damage even Fukei himself, Suiboku remained coolly dismissive.
“You aim too low, my friend.”
The elder apprentice, the man who had spent long centuries training to defeat the world’s most powerful individual… Suiboku dismissed that man’s fighting style as aiming for too low a goal.
“Would it please you to kill me this way?”
“Silence!”
It was a perfectly valid and logical tactic. Given that Fukei was unkillable, just what was wrong with using an attack that would kill his enemy along with himself? He had trained to obtain an unkillable body and had found his own way to acquire invincibility. It wasn’t enough for Fukei not to die. He needed to be the kind of unkillable where he could continue to function despite fighting Suiboku.
“How much training do you think it took me to acquire this power?! How could that be aiming too low?!”
“There’s no relation between your ambitions and your effort. That was something you yourself taught me.”
When faced with the Rain Barrage, Suiboku had used Flash Step to approach Fukei. Technically, he had called Fukei over to him to use as an umbrella, but this time Suiboku remained unmoving, casually calling over to Fukei. This, despite the fact that, at that very moment, giant chunks of ice were falling toward him as a deadly barrage of oversized hail.
“At the time, I had been proud of the fact that I had learned from countless teachers and had learned countless techniques. Since I had been so serious in my attempts to learn and get stronger, I thought there was nothing for me to be ashamed of. But yet you still warned me that there was nothing laudable about effort wasted on a mistake.”
Suiboku made no sign of manipulating the heavens or the earth and simply stood his ground.
“Silence!”
“You’ve changed… I changed you.”
The hail whistled through the air as it approached.
“You’re a symbol of my sins.”
Suiboku slowly began to swing his wooden sword with one hand.
“They’re sins that I can’t possibly atone for. Oh… I’m so very sorry.”

Shifting Heavens, Great Hail. Because it was a technique that created and rained down enormous clumps of ice as hail from the heavens, compared to Rain Barrage, the density of projectiles was much lower. Using Quicken Self to accelerate one's body, it was at least theoretically possible to hit the falling ice boulders with a wooden sword.
But the hail was far too heavy to deflect by just tapping it with a wooden sword. One would need to put strength behind a blow to deflect them. Enough force, in fact, to risk breaking the wooden sword itself. While it was possible to do that with one or two pieces of hail, it would be impossible to use one's full strength to bat away a continual cascade of falling hail.
With a large-scale Shifting Heavens or Earth Manipulation Art, he could shift the course of the hail or make it lighter to prevent it from doing damage. But with this entire area awash in my ki, I could easily interrupt any large-scale Art.
Regardless of whether Fukei had been ambitious in his goals or not, it was impossible for Suiboku to simply deflect the hail with his blade.
Just as he had processed that thought, a giant block of ice appeared right in front of his eyes.
"Whagrroooph!"
Fukei had steeled himself against the possibility of getting hit by hail. But why had a block of ice, one that was supposed to be raining from the sky, suddenly appeared in front of his eyes and slammed into him? Even with his preparation, he had no way of responding to such an unexpected event.
"Wh-What... What is going on...?!"
As he tried to regain his bearings, Fukei was assailed from all sides by ice. There was the standard hail that was raining down from above, of course, but there were also pieces flying upward at him.
Fukei's vision cut in and out as his body was repeatedly destroyed and repaired. Through the flashes of vision, Fukei looked upon Suiboku. The moment the falling hail touched Suiboku's wooden sword, it vanished. Immediately after, a chunk of hail slammed into Fukei's body.
Absurd... Could such a thing...truly be...?!
When the hail generated by the technique had finished falling, there was hardly any of it on the ground near Suiboku, while Fukei was nearly buried in hail.
"The Weaver Girl, mm?"
Fukei still found it difficult to believe, but Suiboku had simply applied a technique Fukei had known about rather than pulling a new Art out of his hat.
Weaver Girl. It was a Flash Step Art that was often paired with Cowherd: an advanced use of Flash Step that teleported an object that was touched into the distance.
"You used the Weaver Girl technique to move the falling hail and hit me with it..."
"Yes, but it was a bit more advanced than that."

Suiboku, who hadn't even broken a sweat, began to explain the mechanics of what he had done to the bloodied Fukei.
"As you know, Flash Step may not take up much ki, but it's a difficult technique to use properly."
Unlike other Immortal Arts, Flash Step didn't require advance preparation, but on the flip side, that meant that it was pretty much impossible to prepare beforehand. That made it a difficult technique to use in combat.
"Have you ever used Flash Step while running or pulled a moving object using Cowherd?"
"…"
"Probably not. As you know, the mechanics of the techniques make that difficult. It took me quite a long time to master it, myself."
It's difficult enough to repeatedly use Flash Step, and more difficult still to do the same with the advanced variations of the technique. Despite the fact that he had seen it with his own eyes, Fukei still couldn't believe what Suiboku had done, given his own familiarity with the technique.
"When you use Flash Step while moving, or Cowherd a moving object, everything stops. Which is why, even if I could move the hail using Flash Step, it would just fall in front of you."
"So it wasn't simply the Weaver Girl?"
"Exactly. With just the Weaver Girl, I couldn't have hit you with the hail."
The more Suiboku explained what he had done, the more incredulous Fukei became.
"Flash Step Perpetual, an Art that allows an object to continue moving after it's moved. While it's not an Ultimate Technique, it's a variation of Flash Step that I've created. I also added a technique that allows me to change the direction of a moving object that's been teleported: Flash Step Art, Scattered Land."
Suiboku had processed an enormous, overwhelming amount of information about each falling piece of hail, and had manipulated each piece without a single failure.
"In addition to the two Flash Step Arts that I developed, I also used Quicken Body to increase my speed; a Ki Blade Art, Cross Touch, that allows me to manipulate anything touched with my blade as I would with my hand; and Weaver Girl to create this current situation."
While particularly difficult techniques were often referred to as "divine" in skill, the truly divine could routinely execute such techniques. For a god, a divine act was something they could do without failure. Gods never consider whether or not they might fail to execute their miracles.
"By the way, I moved a total of fifty-three pieces of ice using my Flash Step. I don't think you kept count, but you've been hit by fifty-two. Do you understand what that means?"
"N-No…"

A moment later a block of ice appeared out of a Flash Step, precisely striking Fukei in the solar plexus. Fukei's body froze in place for several moments.
"Flash Step."
Suiboku appeared in front of his eyes.
"Inner Body Art, Hardened Body."
With Fukei's head bowled forward from the blow, Suiboku's hardened fingers closed with his face.
"Gah...!"
One finger stabbed deeply into each of Fukei's eyes.
"Ki Wave."
Suiboku let loose a ki wave from the fingers buried in Fukei's eyes. The attack sent a direct concussive blow to Fukei's brain, far stronger than when Suiboku had merely grabbed Fukei's head.
"Ough...!"
There was no way for Fukei to utter any words with meaning. His body simply reflexively let out a noise.
"Ki Wave."
Suiboku's right hand, still holding the wooden sword, assaulted Fukei's ear, index finger sticking into Fukei's ear canal. With the finger buried deeply, another ki wave buffeted Fukei's brain.
"Ki Wave."
"Gruh..."
Once again, a ki wave to Fukei's brain. Of course, he would probably recover immediately, but Fukei's body had gone limp.
"Leaden Body."
Suiboku held Fukei's head in place with both hands, then slammed Fukei's head into an ice block jutting out of the ground. Fukei, of course, landed face first.
"Ki Wave."
Then Suiboku added another ki wave with Fukei's head shoved against the ground.
"Earth Manipulation Art, Harden Earth."
Suiboku held Fukei's head to the ground with his left hand, waving his right hand and his wooden sword toward the ground in front of him. The dirt near Suiboku and Fukei floated into the air and was compressed into a stone.
Damnation...! I can't escape if my body is still heavy...!
Fukei couldn't see the stone forming as his face was buried in the ground. He released the Leaden Body that he had constantly active and tried to stand by making his body lighter.
"Feather Step."
"Quicken Self."
Suiboku slammed Fukei's lighter head into the floating rock. The attack was enough to not only crush Fukei's face and head, but also to flatten part of his neck.

Still, Fukei continued to regenerate. Before he finished healing, Suiboku had dropped back to momentarily pause his attacks.

How... This is simply impossible!

Though Fukei had taken countless mortal blows, his life continued to burn as brightly as his hatred. At the same time, he'd been unable to step on Suiboku's shadow. Not only had Fukei not been able to inflict so much as a scratch upon his hated brother, Suiboku hadn't even broken a sweat. Fukei couldn't bring himself to believe this was simply from a gap in ability. There was some reasoning behind it, some logic behind it.

Suiboku was a monstrously talented man, but all he has in his body is ki. Meaning that whatever is driving this situation is an Immortal Art...

The Immortal Arts had no power to read the future or change fate. While Immortals could read auras and presences, at most they could detect killing intent and fear. An Immortal might be able to read an opponent's next step, but it was impossible for an Immortal to consistently read an opponent's moves two, even three steps ahead of their own actions.

...If this is Suiboku's Ultimate Technique, then what's the mechanism behind it? Just how does he end up in this state? If all he's doing is reading my next move, he shouldn't have been able to avoid Great Hail or Pangu — Chaos Upon Heavens and Earth.

Even if Suiboku was reading Fukei's actions, he shouldn't have been able to escape from the Shifting Heavens Art. It was natural that Fukei would assume there was something deeper at play.

No, think... Why can Suiboku use Flash Steps in succession? Is it related to this situation?

The speculation and analysis he hadn't done when he had the advantage was now forced upon him now that he was at a disadvantage. Fukei struggled to understand Suiboku by processing the many things that felt wrong, the many things that simply shouldn't have been possible but were happening before his very eyes.

...It's at least worth exploring.

Fukei drew back with Vajra from a long distance. It was the exact same attack he had used against Suiboku in their initial exchange. That was intentional, and there was a reason behind it.

Earlier, I struck diagonally before sweeping with my spear. But this time, I'll strike from an angle, then unleash a ki wave. A ki wave from my entire body should at least hit him. Even if I can't hit him, I'll at least have a better idea of what Suiboku is doing.

Fukei glared at Suiboku, standing there with his wooden sword in a middle stance, not with hatred, but with suspicion.

I've prepared several other major techniques for this day, but at this rate, I'll run out of hands to play. Since my body will not fail, then I need to start by exposing him.

Fukei was calmly, carefully seeking not to settle the battle, but to find a path to victory. Fukei had accepted the sheer absurdity of Suiboku's abilities and had decided to restart his efforts.
"Hmmph!"
He leapt forward, attempting to strike with Vajra.
"Flash Step."
In that instant, Suiboku moved forward using Flash Step. With his wooden sword in a middle stance, Suiboku had already closed in before Fukei could react.
"Cursed...!"
Fukei's mind replayed the second exchange with Suiboku. A powerful blow to the solar plexus that came after Suiboku had avoided his attacks with a series of slight, precise Flash Steps.
"Ki Wave Art, Quivering Feet."
"Gah!"
The exact same scene repeated itself. This time the blow landed upon Fukei's flank rather than on his gut, but there wasn't much difference in the result. Despite attempting to expose Suiboku's methods, Fukei had only succeeded in taking the same attack a second time.
"Simplistic, Brother."
Suiboku watched as Fukei struggled to regain control of his body as the shock from the blow receded.
"If what you're trying is seeing what I'm capable of doing, then there's no point unless you consider all of the techniques you know I have and attack me with something that those techniques can't handle."
Not only had Suiboku read what Fukei was after, but he had completely swept aside Fukei's plans.
He's reading me, then? But how? That's beyond what the Immortal Arts can do!
In the end, Fukei couldn't help but ask aloud.
"Just what is...what is your Ultimate Technique?"
Fukei had given up on finding out for himself, and instead posed it as a question to Suiboku.
Those watching the battle between the two aboard Noah had a different question eating at them.
"...Say, just what is an Ultimate Technique?" Happine asked the question that the others were having trouble putting into words. She understood the connotation of the term, but didn't know precisely what it was supposed to refer to.
"A technique that's the final destination of the road traveled by a long-lived acolyte of a given art. You should think of it as the ultimate fighting technique developed by that individual," Elixir explained confidently.
Well, based on the conversation between Fukei and Suiboku, that seemed about right. But the answer just led her to yet another question.

“Then just what is Master Suiboku’s Ultimate Technique? I mean, based on what we’ve seen so far, he’s just doing what Sansui usually does. I mean, I know he’s doing something that’s really advanced in skill, but I haven’t seen him doing anything that was particularly special.”
If the Ultimate Technique was the final technique obtained by mastering a given art, then it should be something Suiboku’s apprentice Sansui couldn’t use. Fukei’s Ultimate Technique was easy to understand, but it was questionable if Suiboku was actually even using his Ultimate Technique.
“Maybe it just means Suiboku taught it to Sansui as well?” Ukyou, who didn’t know much about Sansui or Suiboku, offered a hypothesis that was based on his ignorance.
Since Sansui was Suiboku’s apprentice, it wouldn’t be strange if Suiboku had taught Sansui his unique Ultimate Technique, would it?
“No, that can’t be right. Sansui said he’d only learned four techniques from Master Suiboku.” Douve, who knew Sansui well, shot down Ukyou’s hypothesis.
Ki Wave, Feather Step, Ki Blade, and Flash Step. Those were the four techniques that Sansui had learned from Suiboku.
“My Ultimate Technique, mm?”
As though to answer both audiences, Suiboku began to explain. His voice rang out well into the distance.
“To put it simply, it’s an Ultimate Technique of the heart.”
None of them could understand what Suiboku was saying. Everyone, Fukei, included, found Suiboku’s description indecipherable. None of them figured Suiboku would start talking about some hokey spiritualism rooted in kindness or courage, and surely anything of that sort wouldn’t be enough to counter Fukei’s power.
“How dare you lie to me!”
“No, it’s true. But, well… I suppose my phrasing needs work. My Ultimate Technique is the Ultimate Technique of the brain.”
Suiboku then pointed to his own head.
“Humans use their brains to manage everything in battle. Moving their body, observing their surroundings, imagining what their opponent is thinking, how to proceed in the coming move. That’s true even of Immortals.”
Suiboku had just described the obvious. While there were turns of phrase about one’s body moving of its own volition, the truth was that it was still the brain calling the shots.
“Which is why it’s very difficult to do all of those things at once. Even so, battle demands that you do all those things. You move your body as you observe your enemy, contemplate what moves they have at their disposal, and come up with a way to win. And if you’re not aware of your surroundings while you do so, you can end up getting stabbed in the back.”
Yes, it was obvious. It was something that Douve, Happine, and even Paulette understood. Dancing was a form of moving one’s body. If you were

focused too much on the dance moves, upon your own movements, then you might forget to pay attention to your partner, forget to listen to the music, and even bump into the people around you. The only way to avoid that was practice.
“An Immortal can detect and read auras around them, but an unskilled Immortal must sit down, close themselves off from all of their other senses, and focus upon detecting those auras. With training, an Immortal can learn to read auras and detect presences in battle, but doing so takes some of their attention from something else.”
This was something that those who weren’t Immortals couldn’t quite understand, but could easily imagine. It’s probably similar to listening to your surroundings while fighting. There’s nothing odd about Suiboku’s logic.
“Then what should one do? How does one move their body exactly as needed, grasp their surroundings entirely, watch the opponent in front of them, consider their attacks, and think of how to win? How can one do everything that’s necessary all at once?”
This was the question that the world’s most powerful man had sought an answer to. It was the answer that defined his very life, the enlightenment that came with mastering the art of battle.
“You simply need to practice until you can do it.”
That was a completely obvious observation.
“If it’s hard to move one’s body while paying attention to the surrounding auras, then the only thing to do is to keep moving one’s body while perceiving the auras around them.”
It’s hard to move your body while trying to detect sounds. When focusing on your hearing, the motor skills responsible for swinging your sword become sloppier to compensate. But if you were to focus instead on your motor skills, then you’d start missing audible cues.
But if you made a daily habit of both moving your body and perceiving the auras around you, and if you could spend a long, almost an endless amount of time doing that as an Immortal, then it wouldn’t be impossible to do both at once with a high degree of precision.
“Once you can do that, then you next add imagining what your opponent is thinking or how they’re intending to win. If you can’t manage it, then you keep practicing until you can. If it’s imperfect and imprecise, then you practice it until it’s perfect and precise.”
“Then does that mean…?”
Those that knew Sansui’s method of training came to a realization the moment they heard Suiboku’s words. Saiga was the only one to voice it, but the others were thinking the same thing.
Sansui had spent five hundred years doing practice swings in the forest, but the practice swings themselves weren’t important. The most important thing was that he was moving his body as he detected the auras around him.

“Your invincibility is perfect and constant. Likewise, I constantly maintain this mental state. My Ultimate Technique doesn’t need a name, nor should it need one. It’s something that its wielder can do all the time without fail. It’s the right frame of mind that a swordsman, that an Immortal, should have at all times.”
The recognition that one was using a technique at all was a sign that one wasn’t ready. Which was why the Ultimate Technique that Suiboku had developed throughout his life needed to be taught without the realization that it was a technique at all.
“Suiboku-Style Immortal Arts. Art of War: Ultimate Technique. Ten Bulls of Enlightenment. Tenth Stage of Enlightenment. First Truth of the Immortal Sword’s Self-Salvation. State of No Doubt.”
The man who had maintained his position as the world’s most powerful individual, who had continued to win and had never lost to anyone, who was a force that stood apart from everything else in this world. The final destination that he had arrived at on his path through life was the realization that he was the same as everyone else.
“As such, it’s a move that I have already given to my apprentice.”
Ten Bulls of Enlightenment. Tenth Stage of Enlightenment.
The phrase referred to the act of passing on one’s enlightenment to others. Suiboku’s training was complete when his apprentice Sansui had learned Suiboku’s Ultimate Technique without realizing that he had done so. In that sense, the apprentice named Sansui was Suiboku’s Ultimate Technique.

Part 7 — Decision

“Always hold a wide view of the world, work to properly observe the opponent, never stop thinking, and believe in one’s training. Easy to say, difficult to do. Yet my apprentice has reached that state of mind.”
Suiboku had thoroughly displayed his skill and mastery and was now explaining, without reservation, how he had come to this point. Ordinarily, he should be proud of this accomplishment, but Suiboku’s voice was tinged only with regret.
“That’s not all. My apprentice has also passed on that mindset, that heart, to his own apprentices,” Suiboku said, gesturing toward Noah.
Suiboku spoke of the weak men, the men who were nothing compared to Sansui or to Suiboku, as though they were the most precious things in the world.
“I’m content with my life. If you want to kill me, then do as you wish.”
Saiga, Tahlan, even Ran. All the others who had received instruction from Sansui, as well. All of them felt their eyes sting with the warmth of their tears.
Suiboku had offered his head to Fukei not simply out of a desire to apologize to his erstwhile brother. They understood at that moment that it was also because Suiboku felt contentment in his life. Content at the fact

that his son Sansui was now in the process of raising his grandchildren — that is, themselves.
The personification of battle, the ultimate swordsman, the greatest Immortal, he who had sought truth for over four thousand years, was proud of them despite all their shortcomings. How could they not weep with joy?
“There’s still plenty I want to teach my apprentice. There’s plenty I wish to do for my apprentice’s apprentices. But I’ll give those regrets and desires as my penance to you. Now...”
Just as Saiga and the others realized what Suiboku intended, Fukei also came to an understanding. Suiboku was content, which was why he could choose death. It was because he was content with his life that he wished to atone for the mistakes of his past. He was happy and content, which was why he pitied Fukei, who was not.
“How daaare you!”
Suiboku had matured and come into his own as an Immortal. He had become a proper Immortal and was fulfilling his role as an instructor. It was because he understood this that Fukei was filled with rage.
“Now?! You come to this point NOW?! After all that has happened?!”
Since their reunion, they had fought until this very moment. Fukei had spent thousands of years refining his skills for this day, but none of what he had learned had worked. Fukei was far from content and he was the furthest thing there was from happy.
“That’s... That’s! That’s exactly what you denied that you scoffed at for so long! That’s, that’s...”
Those were the obvious things that Fukei had tried to teach Suiboku. Things he had spoken of for so long that he had exhausted all the words he could use to try to get the point across.
“They were things that...that I told you over and over and over!”
Fukei had been the elder apprentice, which was why he had often been tasked with instructing Suiboku. How an Immortal ought to behave. What an Immortal ought to teach his apprentice. How an Immortal ought to interact with mortals.
He had continued to lecture Suiboku even as Suiboku didn’t obey a single one of the teachings of being an Immortal, even as he broke all the teachings, behaved like no Immortal ought to behave. For a thousand years, Fukei had lectured Suiboku on the right way to live. And yet, over those thousand years, Suiboku had never once listened to his words.
“Why?! Why do you, now, of all times, suddenly respect me?! There’s no point to this! No point to respecting me three thousand years after you destroyed our homeland! Why did it take you FOUR THOUSAND YEARS to reach such a simple conclusion?!”
Fukei, who was supposed to be in the right, had never been able to defeat Suiboku. There was not a single time when Fukei had managed to outperform him. Whatever he tried, Suiboku, the man who was wrong, was always better than him.

“Then what was my thousand years worth?! What were those thousand years when I kept shouting at you to change your ways?! What about the three thousand years after?! What worth was there to those three thousand years?! Those three thousand years when I aped you, when I sought to become invincible just to kill you!”
The things that Fukei had told Suiboku between four thousand and three thousand years ago, over the course of a millennium, had all been correct. But it was only five hundred years ago that Suiboku had accepted that fact.
“It’s too late! Why did you take so damnably long to realize such a simple truth?!”
No matter how strong Suiboku was now, no matter how great and how right, no matter how much he was the ideal Immortal, that didn’t cancel out what he had done in the past.
Listening to Fukei’s lament, Ran felt an ache in her heart. Fukei wasn’t a monster or a beast. He was someone who could be understood. He was only human. That was why they were all certain in that moment that it was far too late for words. That no words could possibly change his mind.
Words were meaningless precisely because Fukei had a heart, because Fukei had poured his heart and soul into his training, and because Fukei was a serious, studious man. Fukei couldn’t take the head Suiboku offered to him, nor could he reconcile with Suiboku.
“Did I not do enough?! Would things have been different had I spent another thousand years lecturing you? Have my four thousand years been meaningless...?!”
The tragic fate of having Suiboku as his younger brother... It meant that all of Fukei’s efforts throughout his four thousand years had been meaningless. That fact, that reality, brutally assailed Fukei’s soul. The emotions sent an enormous jolt of energy into Vajra.
“Suiboku. My heart…will not change.”
Now that everything had been revealed, there wasn’t a single thing that could force Fukei to reconsider.
“I’ll kill you. That’s what those three thousand years were for. I won’t stop until I kill you. Nothing changes, even if you offer up your life.”
Fukei had spent too much time preparing to turn back or even to think about stopping.
“I hate to say this, but...you’re wasting your time,” Suiboku said regretfully, the words bitter as he spoke them.
“While you have infinite possibilities before you, Brother, there’s not a single one of them where you can defeat me.”
Suiboku had no intent to kill, but he was fighting seriously, and so long as he took the fight seriously, there was no way that Fukei could win.
“You might have the invincible body, Brother, but you won’t be able to lay a hand on me.”
Suiboku gathered information from what he felt from the world, anticipated the future with his feelings, restricted the future with his thoughts, and

turned those possibilities into reality by acting. It wasn't some prosaic form of precognition where he was choosing the ideal future from a range of possibilities. Seeking an ideal future was what the weak did in desperation. The desperation of seeking a glimmer of hope through countless examples of failure.
Suiboku and his apprentice Sansui could come up with an endless variety of paths and results that led to victory.
"While there's only one of you in the world, Brother, even if there were billions of you, you wouldn't be a match for me."
Suiboku was there in the flesh. Even so, no one could touch him, nor even approach him. He was a man who took finite possibilities in a finite world and combined them to create infinite outcomes.
"If you're without exhaustion, then I'm without end. No matter how much you try, no matter how much you might struggle, there's no point to it. I think you know that better than anyone, Brother."
"There is a point! If I don't give up, I'll eventually reach you! I'll defeat you!"
"You really don't believe that, do you, Brother? You have no intention of beating me."
The futility of being right. The ruthlessness of truth. The nightmare of finding the answer. Suiboku and Fukei were confirming those things by facing each other. If the world was driven by falsehoods, perhaps they wouldn't have had to exchange these words.
"Why do you seek to be invincible? Why do you assume that you'll be cut or smashed by me? Why don't you think of beating me overwhelmingly? Why not do as I did to you, Brother? Batter me, annihilate me, break me down into tears and toy with me? Why didn't you seek to do that, Brother?"
The invincible body without limit that Fukei had sought to achieve was a threat to Saiga and the others, and it had seemed to be completely unbeatable.
But Suiboku was unmoved by Fukei's invincibility. He continued his observations, continued to analyze Fukei's abilities. It was because of this that Suiboku had touched upon the heart of Fukei's thoughts.
"You weren't afraid of losing to me. You were afraid of giving up on me. Your objective has become to continue challenging me. You've given up on trying to beat me."
If Fukei had been truly strong, he wouldn't have had his head caved in, and he wouldn't have needed to plan for that contingency. Saiga and the others couldn't help but accept Suiboku's logic. But Fukei, even if he heard Suiboku's words, could only pretend not to hear them.
"Brother, you've compromised too much. You seemed completely unconcerned when people other than me were able to hurt you. No doubt you didn't even think of whether or not you could beat me with that. You took Vajra as another compromise. You didn't feel like you could beat me without her. The one who doesn't trust his own training is you, Brother."

Fukei did all he could do to avoid listening to Suiboku. He couldn't bring himself to admit that the pride he felt in his three thousand years, the accumulated training, the Ultimate Technique he had arrived at, all of those things were things he had settled upon as a compromise.
"To not realize your own shortcomings is a sign of immaturity. To accept one's shortcomings is a sign of growth. Those were your words, Brother."
If Fukei admitted it, he would also admit that the emotions that drove him didn't come from any great cause or justification or even a sense of responsibility. No, he'd have to admit and understand that it all came from his own wounded pride, his own petty resentment.
"I've committed terrible crimes that can't be forgiven. But that's not true of you, Brother. You lose nothing by owning your mistake here."
Just as Suiboku once dismissed everything that Fukei had said out of a sense of pride, Fukei now needed to dismiss everything that Suiboku said to him. Had it been anyone but Suiboku who said those words to him, perhaps the outcome could have been different. But coming from Suiboku, the only thing Fukei could do was reject them out of hand.
As Suiboku had pointed out, Fukei's objective had been to never give up. Which meant that giving up was the only thing he couldn't possibly do at this moment.
"Is that all you have to say?"
Fukei hadn't lost anything yet. He had an indefatigable spirit that he had built up over four thousand five hundred years. His ki was limitless. His body was unkillable.
"As you say, I have an indestructible body and all eternity ahead of me. However limitless you might be, I'll eventually reach you."
He was still conscious, he wasn't restrained, and he wasn't dead. So why should he give up?
"No matter how much you speak your empty words, I won't ever let you escape. If you want to end this battle, then go ahead and kill me."
No one was surprised at this final split. Fukei couldn't back down here. If he was wise enough to do that, then he would have given up on Suiboku ages ago.
"No one can stop me!"
Suiboku's present state was irrelevant. The fact that Suiboku's past existed was reason enough for Fukei to refuse to offer forgiveness.
"Then I have no choice."
The man, who had become the strongest, then realized it was meaningless and retreated to the forest... Suiboku once again confirmed that he himself still fell short of his own ideal. There was simply no meaning, no depth or skill left in any of it. He needed to end it, and it would only end if one of them died.
With a sigh, Suiboku slid his wooden sword back into his sash.
"Guess I'll kill him."

Part 8 — Ultimate Technique

Suiboku's dispirited words, words that had given up on all other possibilities, reached everyone's ears. All of them could only stare with mouths agape. They couldn't understand what those words meant.

It's not that it was an outlandish statement, based on how the battle had unfolded so far. The voice had simply stated that it had decided to kill its opponent, an opponent who had rejected all attempts at persuasion. But the voice, while filled with a tone of resignation, had nothing in the way of doubt.

Suiboku was completely certain that he could destroy Fukei's unkillable body and undo the invincibility that had been the subject of so much of Fukei's boasting.

"R-Ridiculous…"

The fear of death ran a shiver up Fukei's spine. The elder Immortal, who had spent a thousand years being trampled and beaten up by Suiboku, felt his rival's killing intent for the first time ever.

"To kill me, you'll have to destroy the entire planet."

"Yes, true. Frankly, I was surprised that they couldn't consume your body with magical fire. Flames formed from mana disrupt the flow of ki, but you've overcome even that problem. Your ability to regenerate instantly from being decapitated or disintegrated is truly a feat worthy of being called an Ultimate Technique. In that sense, your ability is much superior to mine."

Having made his decision to kill Fukei, Suiboku spoke plainly and coolly. While he was praising Fukei, he didn't consider him a threat.

"The only ways to defeat you would be to turn you to stone with the Hex Arts, kill you using Pandora, or destroy you, the planet, and everything else."

The most powerful man in the world couldn't use the Hex Arts and didn't possess Pandora. So how did he intend to kill the unkillable?

"To destroy this world while fighting you would probably take several hundred years. In all honesty, even I hesitate at the thought of spending so long pummeling you."

Suiboku, who felt no trepidation at all when contemplating the destruction of the planet, demonstrated another possibility.

"Flash Step Art, Cowherd."

Numerous pieces of Fukei's body had been scattered in his fight with Saiga, Ran, and Tahlan; there were an unbelievable number of body parts scattered around the battlefield. Having teleported them to him and thus created a small mound of discarded flesh, Suiboku gently pressed his palm to the accumulated parts.

"Though their scent lingers, the blossoms have scattered…"

"Nothing in this world is unchanging…"

"Crossing beyond the karmic mountains…"

“We wake from shallow dreams.”
While reciting a poem, one without any particular supernatural effect, Suiboku activated his technique. When he reached the end of the poem’s second stanza, all of the body parts began to fade into dust. By the time Suiboku had finished his recitation, they had vanished from existence.
“Suiboku-Style Immortal Arts, Ki Wave Art: Ultimate Technique, Ten Bulls of Enlightenment, Sixth Stage of Enlightenment. Riding the Bull Home: Tranquility of Ending and Rest for the Living.”
Suiboku thus announced, in effect, that he would use this technique to kill Fukei.
“Hand of Eternal Release.”
Fukei’s heart understood that his invincibility had been broken. His body cowered at a terror that outweighed the terror of pain: the fear of being erased.
“Th-That’s…!”
It was a phenomenon that Fukei himself had seen before, an occurrence that was far more familiar to every Immortal than the State of No Doubt.
“Yes, this is the state that Immortals who have finished their training enter. When they set aside all of their regrets, they return to nature. This is a technique that causes the same thing to happen to its target.”
No matter how invincible Fukei might be, that invincibility was rooted in the Immortal Arts. As such, it was possible to defeat that invincibility through those same Immortal Arts, and Suiboku already had the means to do so at his disposal.
“It’s a difficult technique to use, as it requires ensuring that the opponent can’t move for a certain amount of time. That’s why I didn’t teach it to my apprentice. I had no intention of teaching it to him, anyway, but…it’s probably the appropriate technique to kill you.”
Everyone finally understood Suiboku’s intentions. He had truly intended to offer up his life to Fukei. Had he wanted to do so earlier, he could have killed Fukei at any moment.
However, Suiboku had decided to actually kill him. This was a settled matter. A decision made by the most powerful man in existence, a presence so far beyond others as to be absolute.
“I’ll now destroy your body until you can’t move, but I’ll do my best to spare you any unnecessary pain. Please consider it the minimal amount of mercy I can offer to you, the brother to whom I owe so much.”
Had Fukei been able to bow his head and apologize at this moment, the result would have been much happier for everyone. Had Fukei been able to turn his back and run, Fukei would have been spared a great deal of emotional anguish. No matter how shameful, how embarrassing it might be, it would be so much easier if Fukei could cling to the need to win or to survive.

But even under these circumstances, Fukei couldn’t give up on beating Suiboku. He couldn’t accept that everything he had done up to this point had been meaningless.
“Err, errrm, mmm…”
He was certain that he was about to die, and yet he still couldn’t back down, because his desires far outweighed his certainty. Given how hard he had worked, how he had never given up, perhaps he could still win if he mustered everything he had against Suiboku. Fukei had no choice but to cling to a hope that had now gone from merely a desire to just fantasy. He was, in the end, completely a human being.
“Raaaaah!”
It was because he was human that Fukei was here.
“Fukei-Style Immortal Arts, Inner Body Art: Ultimate Technique! Chiyou… Unrivaled Under Heaven!”
He unleashed an Ultimate Technique that combined all the effects of Strengthen Self, Quicken Self, and Leaden Step. Fukei clung to an Ultimate Technique because he wanted — he needed — to believe that he could do it. Swinging Vajra wildly in a sweep attack, he tried to split Suiboku’s torso in two.
Although he understood intellectually that there was no way his blow would land, he still prayed in his heart that it would hit as he swung through, even while knowing in his mind that he would feel no impact when he finished his swing.
Even if he had hit Suiboku, there was no way that he would have felt anything when he sliced through the defenseless Suiboku, and if Suiboku had avoided the attack, he wouldn’t have felt any impact there either.
It wasn’t just Fukei who was caught by surprise. Everyone who watched the scene unfold could only stare in bemusement. Despite the fact that the blow had landed, there had been no impact. Vajra recognized this more than anyone else. Her own blade, reinforced by Fukei’s power, had landed upon Suiboku, but it hadn’t reached him.
“What…is this…?!”
“Suiboku-Style Immortal Arts, Feather Step Art: Ultimate Technique. Ten Bulls of Enlightenment, Ninth Stage of Enlightenment. Reaching the Source — The World Exists Not as Matter but as Connections.”
Fukei’s attacks couldn’t reach Suiboku at this moment. If Fukei was unkillable because his body would regenerate and rebuild no matter how much damage it sustained, Suiboku had become invincible because he could nullify every attack that came at him.
“Countless Questions.”
The Immortal Arts manipulated gravity, but they couldn’t create or erase gravity entirely. With Leaden Step, Ki Collection was used to gather weight from around the wielder’s surroundings to focus upon themselves or the objects they were touching. Feather Step, on the other hand, distributed one’s weight to the things around them.

What Suiboku was currently doing with his technique wasn’t the redistribution of weight, but of kinetic energy. Suiboku took the kinetic energy from the blow that landed upon himself and used Ki Collection to scatter it across a small area, effectively nullifying the attack.
“Th-This… With this level of precision…?!”
This was, again, an effect that Fukei had already seen. Fukei knew a technique similar to this one, but while he could reduce the impact of a blow, he couldn’t completely nullify it. The blow that Fukei had landed, while not extraordinarily fast or fueled by supernaturally strong muscles, was much heavier in weight than any ordinary attack.
Fukei had focused the weight he had gathered from his surroundings on a single point at the tip of his spear. It was hard enough for the attacking side to add weight at the moment that their attack connected. And yet, Suiboku had done the exact opposite while being on the receiving end of a blow.
“Brother.”
Fukei had thought he could win, if only he could land a blow, but it turned out even that was a miscalculation. He had mistaken the opponent he had rated so highly for someone he was capable of dealing with.
“I don’t intend to teach this technique to my apprentice either. I’m sure you realized this, but if you can use this technique in battle, it’s still faster to just avoid an attack altogether.”
Suiboku was in such a position of superiority that he could use a meaninglessly complicated technique for the hell of it.
“Raaaaaah!”
Fukei lost any semblance of calm he might have had. He launched into a mix of feints and attacks using Vajra.
However, Suiboku completely saw through all of his attacks. No matter where he aimed for, Fukei’s blade wouldn’t land, much less do any damage. Fukei’s fighting techniques couldn’t even ruffle Suiboku’s hair.
“Now.”
Suiboku spent a moment in thought as he continued to stand on the receiving end of Fukei’s attacks.
“How shall I stop you from moving?”
Suiboku began considering how to create the opening necessary to land the technique that forced his opponent to become one with nature. Because he could come up with a near infinite number of methods and he could execute any one of them, he took his time to decide.
Watching Suiboku fall into thought, Fukei leapt backward in retreat. The reality that he would soon die without accomplishing anything began to weigh upon him.
He had spent three thousand years training in deadly earnest. He had acquired an almost excessive amount of power and had let himself believe that he was without peer. Even a swordsman who wielded a Sacred Treasure and had gifts from God himself couldn’t defeat him. But none of that had been enough to catch Suiboku, the only man who mattered.

Fukei hadn’t gotten closer to Suiboku; he had, in fact, fallen further behind. The brutal truth was that, while he might have gotten stronger, his target had grown much, much more powerful still in the same span.
Just how is he…so powerful?!
The brutal, plain truth. He had trained and became stronger. But his target had gotten even stronger than that. That meant, in effect, that he had achieved nothing from his training.
Training paid as the price for strength didn’t always lead to victory. This was exacerbated in this case by the fact that Fukei’s target was Suiboku. Suiboku, the most powerful man in the world, the monster that existed outside of common sense, a being that even God feared.
The existence of absolute, ultimate power created a harsh reality. Facing off against ultimate power, that single factor rendered everything else meaningless. Luck was of no use, miracles didn’t exist, inner struggles and justification and hatred were all ultimately meaningless. Demoralization became despair, but there was nothing beyond that for it to develop into.
“Ahhhh. Aggghaaaaaah!”
“Fukei-Style Immortal Arts, Shifting Heavens: Ultimate Technique. Master of the Nine Heavens and Ruler of the Gods of Lightning.”
Having entered a state of supreme confusion, Fukei could no longer even recite the names of his techniques. Even in his confusion, though, he could control the enormous storm clouds, using them as an efficient way of creating electricity.
Effectively Fukei was manufacturing lightning. The larger the cloud, the more power behind the lightning bolt. By manipulating the shape of the clouds with his Immortal Arts and using the Divine Spear to control the lightning itself, Fukei was capable of creating a literal pillar of electricity as his weapon.
“Raaaaaaaah!”
With an enormous shout the heavens raged. The blow that was named after the Gods of Lightning struck at the Berserker God. It was nature’s hammer, a power that far exceeded human capability to understand. It was enough to buffet Noah despite not hitting her directly.
“Aahhhhhhhh!”
Noah let out a shriek of fear. The defensive barrier deployed around her began to buckle. Because there were people aboard her, Noah’s defenses were substantially more powerful than when Suiboku and Shouzo had brought her down. And yet, she was almost destroyed by the blast effect from the lightning strike.
“Noooooo! I’m going to breaaaak! Danua, heeeeelllp!”
As the completely unbelievable scene unfolded before them, Noah’s passengers almost fell to their knees. A lightning flash that burned itself into their retinas and made the Shifting Heavens techniques from earlier seem like mere childish pranks flashed before their eyes.
“Th-This is…ridiculous…”

Shouzo's legs had given out from under him at the sheer scale of the ultimate Shifting Heavens Art. He felt that he wouldn't be able to counter this lightning, this divine judgment, even if he used every drop of mana that coursed through his body. The lightning seemed like it wouldn't just burn away the ground, but penetrate through the planet's crust. It was far, far too much firepower to direct into killing a single person.
"Th-This is... Even Master Suiboku might..."
It was as though the entire world was trying to kill Suiboku. Even the term "divine judgment" seemed to understate the power of the bright searing ray of lightning that lit the cloud-darkened earth in a burning white light. Even if Suiboku was the most powerful man in the world, just what could he do in the face of this power? They couldn't imagine that Suiboku's defensive measures from earlier could stop this attack.
Of course, Suiboku probably had a way of defeating this attack. It was just that none of them could imagine what that would be.
"Whoa, whoa, whoa, this is lasting waaaay too long. Just how badly does he want to kill this guy?"
Ukyou was stunned at just how long the pillar of lightning had continued without interruption. True, it probably would take this level of power for this amount of time to actually kill Suiboku. But even then, the amount of murderous intent driving this attack was terrifying.
"...That's impossible."
But Ukyou was worried about the wrong thing. Vajra, who had been used to unwillingly amplify the technique, couldn't believe what was happening before her eyes. Fukei's attack had already ended. Neither Fukei nor Vajra could understand why the lightning continued to fall.
"That's... No, that can't be..."
There could only be one reason. There was only one man in this world who could interfere with an Art wielded by Fukei and Vajra.
"Suiboku-Style Immortal Arts, Ki Blade Art: Ultimate Technique."
The accumulated lightning had finally been exhausted. And yet there were still countless storm clouds blanketing the sky, but those began to fall toward the ground. A glance up at the sky showed that the clouds were swirling above. It was as though the clouds were being swallowed by a giant drain, swirling in a billowing formation that resembled a reversed tornado.
"Ten Bulls of Enlightenment. Seventh Stage of Enlightenment. The Bull Transcended."
The storm clouds were all swallowed into a single point upon the earth, and at its center stood a single man. A single man, who gathered the nearly infinite storm clouds to him with an expression of disinterest, boredom, and sadness.
"I Alone am Lord of Heaven and Earth."
Beneath the clear starlit sky, without a single cloud remaining in it, the man held a sword that had all of that massive storm compressed within it.
"Blade of the Heavenly Canopy."

That man was the world’s most powerful man, Suiboku. A man who dwelt in the realm of the gods, a man who could simply crush an opponent who wielded the entirety of the heavens and the earth against him.
“Now.”
None of what was happening made the slightest bit of sense to the others. Everyone present: Fukei, Vajra, and those aboard Noah, they had such difficulty processing what was happening that their minds didn’t even register surprise at what was unfolding before them.
“What do you think about this technique?”
The dark clouds that had coalesced into the form of a sword occasionally had bolts of lightning flickering within them. This, again, was a technique he hadn’t taught his apprentice. It wasn’t a technique worth leaving to future generations.
Suiboku looked upon the sword he had created with exasperation, with pity. It was a weapon that he had created when he had been immature, when he still struggled with weakness in his heart. It was simply an embarrassing artifact of the past, something that held no worth to him now.
“This technique, in the end, isn’t much different from the other Shifting Heavens Arts. It can’t be used unless you go to the trouble of gathering and moving clouds around before the battle. Silly, isn’t it? You’d have to trudge all the way to the sea or a lake every time you ran out of clouds.”
Even if the heavens wielded in his hand could split the very earth… If that was all it could do, the blade presented no threat to Fukei.
“I couldn’t teach such a terrible technique to my apprentice. I never considered what I intended to fight, what I intended to slay, with this weapon.”
What made the situation hopeless for Fukei was the fact that the one wielding that blade was Suiboku.
“This was a blade that I created because I still regretted letting go of Eckesachs,” Suiboku said with self-mockery, as he reflected on and repented for his past actions.
It was a confession about his own past. A confession wherein Suiboku felt shame about his immaturity. Unfortunately, no one was listening to his confession.
When facing Fukei, who wielded the heavens and the earth, Saiga, Ran, and Tahlan had sought to interrupt his techniques by attacking quickly. Fukei might have been unkillable, but even then, they were able to temporarily stop him from wielding his power. So long as the wielder was in front of them, even if that wielder could manipulate the heavens and the earth, it was possible to stop them from doing so.
“This was a technique I created to hide my weakness.”
But the man who currently held the heavens in his hand was Suiboku. There was no way to interrupt this man’s techniques.
“Brother, this is the end.”

Suiboku was wallowing in his sadness. It was the weakness of the world's most powerful man, a weakness that he had never shown to anyone else. It was the weakness of a man who had convinced himself that he needed to show he was stronger than anyone else in the world.
"I truly am sorry. All I ever did was hurt you, Brother. I've never been able to repay a single debt to you."
And yet that weakness was completely unrelated to the tragedy that was about to unfold. Power existed in a realm that was separate from human emotions. Suiboku's sadness wouldn't affect his ability to use his overwhelming power to kill a valued mentor and brother in the slightest.
"Vajra, I'll save you at least. I really am…sorry."
The sword in Suiboku's hand seemed to pop as lightning danced along its surface. Everyone present understood that the technique was reaching the end of its duration. Even Suiboku himself couldn't stop this blade from bursting.
"Suiboku-Style Immortal Arts, Flash Step Art: Ultimate Technique. Ten Bulls of Enlightenment, Eighth Stage of Enlightenment. Bull and Self Transcended."
With that, Suiboku announced to those who watched that the Flash Step he was about to use was beyond comprehension. Fukei was skilled in the Arts that controlled the heavens and earth, and in some areas was superior to Suiboku in power. However, Suiboku was far superior when it came to the use of Flash Step. As such, the Ultimate Flash Step Technique that he was about to use would be far beyond the ability of Fukei to process.
"Evil Reaps What It Sows, Evil's Fruit is Suffering. No Clash of Swords, No Clash of Blades."
Suiboku was preparing the Ultimate Techniques for both the Ki Blade and Flash Step Arts. Through it all, he continued to observe Fukei without a single lapse in concentration. The moment Suiboku waited for was the briefest of openings. The moment that Fukei's grip upon the cowering Vajra loosened for the smallest moment.
"Ah… Ahhh…"
There was no way that Suiboku would miss that opening.
Suiboku executed his Flash Step. He closed the distance with Fukei in an instant, grabbing Vajra from out of Fukei's grasp.
Grasping Vajra with his left hand, his right hand struck with the Blade of the Heavenly Canopy.
"I'm sorry, Brother."
Suiboku then finished his Flash Step. The blade that he swung burst as it impacted against Fukei. The entirety of the storm clouds that Suiboku had gathered in his hand exploded with all of the heat and lightning that they had contained.
Fukei, who was hit by the attack at close range, was immediately reduced to a pile of ash and coal. The blade wasn't finished, of course, and the bright flash of light cut through the earth, burning it as it seared through the land.

From the border between the Arcana Kingdom and the Domino Republic, on the eastern edge of the Caputo territories, it pierced straight through the Royal Territories, then the lands of Disaea on the western edge, and finally it cut straight through the ocean beyond before vanishing into the distant horizon.
“Goodbye, Brother. I’ll join you soon.”
This was supreme mastery of the Flash Step, the supreme mastery of rationalization. The sheer arrogance of a powerful man who would skip even the act of fighting to secure victory. The powerful individual won, and the most powerful side won. There were no miracles, hopes, or possibilities in that outcome.
An unavoidable blow that cut down the enemy in mid-Flash Step… It was a technique that didn’t even allow for a clash of swords.

Part 9 — The End

Fukei had become limitless in the same way that there was no end to the earth or no limit to the depths of the sea. By contrast, Suiboku was limitless in the sense of the infinite. Infinity, like the stars in the sky above, was something that existed but could never be reached. If reaching out to touch it didn’t work, then it didn’t matter if it was just out of reach or far, far beyond the horizon.
The realm of the infinite was one where there was always something, whether it was an approach, angle, distance, or time, that put it just out of reach. Suiboku, who had reached that realm, had moved to a plane where even Fukei couldn’t reach him. And it was the days, the attempts and failures, the very techniques that Suiboku had developed and discarded on his journey to that realm, techniques that Suiboku deemed incompatible with his ideals, that were bringing Fukei’s existence to an end.
The charred husk that remained of Fukei’s body was slowly but surely regenerating, but Suiboku moved before that regeneration could finish. The Ultimate Ki Wave Technique that would finish the battle was quietly, gently guiding Fukei to union with nature. It was a technique that peacefully sent Fukei away from his days of suffering and strife.
Suiboku’s heart was anything but clear; if anything, it was wetted by the cascade of regrets that rained down upon it. His heart played back a warm memory he had of Fukei. It was back when his homeland — that one he had destroyed, Hanafuda — still existed. Suiboku had been practicing his Shifting Heavens Art on the peak of the highest mountain.
“There you are, Suiboku.”
“What do you want, Fukei? Are you here to get in my way?”
“No! I’d never do anything of the sort!”
It was late at night — the sun had long since set and there was no moon in the sky. The land of Hanafuda floated peacefully over the clouds.
Meanwhile, Suiboku sat and tried to move the heavens by manipulating the clouds that spread out below him. The mountain was a particularly tall peak

on Hanafuda, a land that floated in the sky. Because of its elevation, the sky felt close at hand, and the stars glimmered so brightly that they almost hurt to look upon.
It was an unforgettably beautiful starry sky and it was an even more beautiful memory.
"…Training this late at night. Surely that's a struggle, even for an Immortal."
"It's no struggle. I'm enjoying it," Suiboku said without a trace of doubt or hesitation. He enjoyed the training and the practice in and of themselves.
"I'm going to become stronger than anyone. How could it be a struggle if I'm learning techniques to achieve that goal?"
"Hrmph… You still feel the need to learn more techniques?"
"I don't plan to compromise. I'll pursue my ideal. I want to be able to say with pride that I'm the strongest."
Suiboku believed without an iota of doubt that the act of learning countless techniques, the act of learning from those who had come before, the accumulation of his knowledge…all of these were pushing him upward toward his goal.
"I want to become much, much stronger. I want to become like those stars. A presence that no one can reach."
He had obtained the goal he had sought in his youth. As he looked back upon the memory, Suiboku was confident he could state that he had achieved his ideal, yet he couldn't stop the tears from flowing as the memory continued to play out.
"Pointless. What's the point of randomly learning techniques? You're just growing arrogant because you've learned more Immortal Arts. You haven't grown at all since the day you became Master Kacho's apprentice."
Suiboku felt a sentimental longing for everything that he saw. It was almost enough to make him forget just what he was doing at that moment.
"Listen. A proper Immortal is one who garners respect by guiding mortals. They gain respect without needing to boast. To go around showing one's strength and bragging about it is not something an Immortal should do."
"Hrmph! You never change. Even though you can't teach me a damned thing, you think you can lecture me."
"How dare you!"
"If you're going to lecture me about that, why don't you try becoming that sort of Immortal first? A proper Immortal who takes no pleasure in isolation nor is possessed by self-love. An Immortal who mortals respect and who properly instructs those that come after him."
"I shall! And you shall see it for yourself! But before that, I need to do something about you first!"
"Why?"
"Because I'm your brother apprentice!"
This memory had actually happened. It was a part of a past that he and Fukei shared, even if Fukei didn't remember the occasion. The memory was

something Suiboku had played back countless times. A way to chastise himself, a way to remain humble, when he was raising Sansui.
“You, who can’t beat me at anything? Why don’t you give up on that and focus on your own training?”
“Hrmph.”
But it was only a small part of the enormous collection of memories from his past. It was one of the few beautiful memories that existed among the sea of awful regrets that had accumulated over the centuries. Suiboku reminisced by looking back upon only the beautiful memories, even as he was putting an end to Fukei, the man that had been consumed by hatred through witnessing Suiboku’s own sins.
“Why are you sitting down next to me?”
“I’m just settling down to get some practice in.”
Suiboku continued to weep, even as he allowed himself to recall only what he wanted to recall.
“You? Who’s less skilled than me? Doing the same training as I am?”
“Hrmph! Listen up and listen well, Suiboku!”
He owed so much to Fukei. Without any semblance of doubt, Fukei had continually tried to guide him. If his teacher, Master Kacho, had been his father, then Fukei was, indeed, his big brother.
“I’ll never give up on you, ever!”
“Though their scent lingers, the blossoms have scattered...”
“Nothing in this world is unchanging...”
“Crossing beyond the karmic mountains...”
“We wake from shallow dreams.”
“Why?!”
“Because I’m your brother!”
Suiboku grieved for Fukei. The story of two brothers, a tale that had spanned four thousand years, finally came to an end.

Part 10 — Misdeeds

“Damn…”

Someone uttered the word on Noah’s deck, but there was no way to determine who it was.

Sansui had repeatedly stated that he was nowhere near Suiboku’s level of skill. Everyone present finally understood what Sansui had meant. There was no way to defeat an opponent like this.

“Yes, yes. Exactly as expected of Suiboku! It was a display worthy of the world’s most powerful man! Fukei showed determination, but he couldn’t win, even when he fought with all his might! There was nothing for him to do about it!” Elixir cheered, trying to close the story with a laugh, even though no one else could join her in the laughter.

The Flash Step that Suiboku had used at the end, and the Ki Blade he had used to literally wield the weather… Seeing those things made even trying to compete with him seem ridiculous.

“What’s wrong…? Oh, Master! You ought to go reclaim Vajra!”

“E-Eh? Oh, right… Right.”

With Elixir’s encouragement, the party left the safety of Noah’s deck. Noah herself had fainted when she saw Suiboku’s last strike and subsequently fell to the ground. That allowed everyone aboard to simply walk down onto the ground.

“Just completely and utterly absurd…”

Ran took another glance around the area. After the battle between the Immortals, the terrain no longer looked anything like what it had been before. The land that had originally been plowed by Shouzo’s magic was now dotted with mountains and valleys, and had completely lost any semblance of its original form. Given that it had been the site of an epic disaster, the outcome was, perhaps, only to be expected.

And the man who had caused that destruction sat where he had erased Fukei from existence. He made no attempt to hide his weakness and shuddered as he was wracked with sadness.

“Suiboku!”

“Ah, Eckesachs…”

Suiboku turned a tear-streaked face to Eckesachs as she ran to him. The man who had continually repaid kindness with spite made no effort to hide his pain and wept openly. The Legendary Sword that he had once unilaterally discarded had forgiven him.

But Suiboku hadn’t been forgiven by Fukei, and Suiboku knew that there was nothing he could have done to change that fact. Eckesachs was unique. No one else would forgive him. His crimes were such that he couldn’t blame them for refusing to offer him forgiveness.

“You’ve become so strong. So very strong…” Eckesachs hesitantly called over to her former master, the man who had just killed his friend. She wanted to try to ease his pain, but her words felt hollow.

“Don’t, Eckesachs. I’m not a man worthy of your praise.”
The world’s strongest man didn’t seem happy in the slightest. If strength came from the ability to achieve what one wanted to achieve, then Suiboku, as he was now, wasn’t strong in the slightest.
“…I’m a shallow man.”
The man who had achieved a power that everyone dreamt of dismissed that as a shallow achievement. While Fukei had refused to admit his mistakes, Suiboku had long since admitted to his own. Both outcomes were so tragic that it was painful to watch.
Just how difficult would it be to admit that thousands of years of effort were all a huge mistake and then to share that fact with others? If that was what growth as a person meant, if that was what came about as a result of training, then perhaps people were all simply tragic beings to their very cores.
“Shallow? Suiboku, what is so shallow about you?”
Eckesachs couldn’t think of Suiboku as shallow. She couldn’t understand in the slightest why the man who had become the world’s most powerful being thought himself shallow. What was so shallow about strength that was free of all compromise? Strength that was the result of an endless search for an ideal? Strength that had been pursued with determination and effort?
As Eckesachs tried desperately to deny Suiboku’s own scorn for himself, Suiboku confessed quietly, “…I wanted to become stronger than anyone. And in the end, I became stronger than anyone. I traveled the world with you, and I never lost to anyone, anywhere. Even then, I thought there was something missing. After leaving you, I searched for strength, and in time, arrived at my current mastery. But…that was also when I understood.”
“Understood what?”
“What I really wanted to do.”
Suiboku had defeated every possible opponent; destroyed every possible country; won victory after victory; killed, slaughtered, and massacred his way across the world. Just what was it that such a man truly wanted?
“I…I wanted to be respected for being strong.”
That was understandable, even easy to empathize with. It was such a crass, simple desire that even a random thug could identify with it and understand.
“I believed that I was extraordinary, unique. I was different from everyone else. I thought that I had a heart and a will that were far beyond the ordinary. I tried to convince myself that becoming stronger and stronger and doing things that no one else could do was what I truly wanted.”
Immortals became Fallen Immortals when they refused to accept their own failings. But the man who had finally come to accept his failings after countless centuries of training demonstrated to the others through his words that it had been a hard, painful path toward accepting just how ugly he was inside.

“In the end, I was just like any other random man. I wanted to be strong so that the people around me would cheer me on, fear me, like me, respect me, and rely upon me…”
Suiboku had lived as he wanted to live. He had battered and killed opponents he didn’t like, and he had destroyed everything that had displeased him. He had done whatever he wanted without restraint.
“…Without giving a second thought to the needs of other people.”
Everyone who came into contact with Sansui asked the question at least once: why was a man who was so powerful willing to listen to the orders of mere mortals and content to serve them?
Suiboku’s confession was an answer to that question, born out of deep regret from a man who had done as he pleased.
“I wanted Sansui to be happy. Not by holing up in a forest like me and staying out of everyone’s way… I wanted him to make use of his sword, his skill, among people…and find happiness.”
Everyone present knew where Sansui currently was.
“I didn’t want him to become a shallow, pathetic wretch who only wanted to fight those who were strong enough to amuse him, a brute who couldn’t admit defeat, a lowlife who simply wanted to bask in the easy win.”
Sansui was off meeting the parents of a woman he had met while working for House Sepaeda. A woman that he had gotten along with and planned to marry.
“I didn’t want...Sansui to end up like me.”
Everyone present knew that Sansui was happy.
“…I’m certain that Sansui is happy,” Douve, Sansui’s employer, said, believing that her words would offer Suiboku solace.
“I see…”
“And that is thanks, without a doubt, to your teachings.”
“…I see. Thank you,” Suiboku, who had been weeping faintly, said, quirking his lips in a smile. “I’m so glad… So, so glad.”
No matter how unhappy Suiboku was with himself, he found joy in the knowledge that his apprentice was happy. His love for Sansui was a compassionate love that asked for nothing in return. It was a love worthy of a man that the Sword Apostle respected as his teacher, a man who was like a god.
A look around showed that all the warriors had prostrated themselves before Suiboku. They had taken off their helms and now knelt in respect. No matter how many mistakes he had made in the past, the Suiboku who sat before them was a forerunner worthy of reverence.
“My days were full of mistakes, but they finally bore fruit when Sansui inherited my teachings. I can believe that now.”
Suiboku still held the unconscious Vajra in his hand. He turned and returned the spear to Ukyou.
“This is yours, is it not? You have my apologies, given that it was my friend that took her from you.”

“O-Oh, thanks…”
Ukyou took a moment to get a good look at the man in front of him. Given his depressed mood, Suiboku had very little presence at the moment. That was why he was so terrifying. Despite his absurd strength, Suiboku appeared to be nothing more than a crying child.
Ukyou felt sincere relief at the fact that he had met this man under these circumstances.
He’s apologetic now, but if he were my enemy, I bet he’d destroy me, country and all. Gotta make sure I don’t piss him off…
Ukyou was dead certain that the berserker god within Suiboku still slumbered. It was possible that something could wake that god and cause Suiboku to destroy everything around him. It was because Suiboku himself understood the fact that he had lived a life so isolated from the mortal world.
“Ahhhm. Can I ask something?” Shouzo inquired, completely oblivious to such dangers. Although he looked a bit apologetic, he seemed to have something he really wanted to ask.
“Um, Mister Fukei said that… Well… He said that you destroyed your homeland. Why did you do that?”
“Mm.”
Fortunately, the question didn’t trigger his anger, but Suiboku still appeared a bit embarrassed. It went without saying that it wasn’t a subject Suiboku liked to discuss.
“Um, if it’s something you don’t want to talk about, you can forget I asked! I’m sorry for asking such a weird question.”
“No… Thank you for asking.”
Shouzo regretted the question, particularly given the fact he had asked it of a man who had just killed his friend, but Suiboku felt that he needed to talk about his past.
“I had never spoken about my past. Not to Eckesachs who was my companion of a thousand years, or to Sansui, my student of five hundred years. To me, the past only represented a time when I was still immature, an embarrassing time when I was still weak. But if I don’t speak of it now, then Fukei will only be remembered as a great evil. That is something I wish to avoid at all costs.”
Suiboku needed to expose his shame to the world to protect his friend’s reputation. The world’s strongest man was about to reveal his own history.
“It was all my fault.”
Suiboku and Fukei had parted ways three thousand years ago. Just what had happened to Fukei that he thirsted for revenge for every one of those three thousand years?
“I was born in a small village on Hanafuda, an island that floated in the sky.”
Everyone in the audience swallowed. They were about to hear a god recount a myth.

“I was still a five-year-old mortal when I was apprenticed to an Immortal.”
Even a man who had lived for four thousand years was once only five years old. Supposedly there was a time when Sansui wasn’t much different than Saiga, but despite it being obviously true, it was still a surprising thing for the hearers to wrap their heads around.
“I had beaten all the men of the village to death…”
“Err, hold on.”
This wasn’t just a minor surprise. Shouzo was the one who spoke up to interrupt him, but everyone felt the same way. The recollection of Suiboku’s past had ceased to make sense in the third sentence. A five-year-old child had somehow killed all of the adult men in the village. That fact alone was completely baffling and impossible to understand.
“W-Was there some sort of tragedy that occurred?”
Surely there must have been something unusual, a particular reason, for a five-year-old child to beat all the adult men in the village to death. Putting aside whether or not a typical five-year-old could even manage to kill so many adults, a five-year-old wouldn’t try to kill all of the adults without some reason.
“Mm… No, there was no tragedy. Well, it was tragic that all the men died, but…” Suiboku said bashfully, or perhaps shyly.
“The men of the village were teaching the older children using wooden swords. Since I was still young, they didn’t let me have a wooden sword, but… Well, I whined and pleaded until they gave me one.”
Sansui’s signature weapon, the wooden sword. Suiboku himself had one in his sash, as well.
“I still can’t forget the excitement I felt when I held a wooden sword for the first time. I felt like I was stronger just from that fact alone. I felt that nothing in the world could beat me. I felt I could beat anyone. I lost myself in a sense of omnipotence.”
This, too, was a common story. It didn’t have to be a legendary sword for it to occur. Holding a sword for the first time, whether a plain steel sword or even a wooden practice sword, would make the wielder feel invincible. It wasn’t a rare thing among boys.
“In my excitement, I beat all the adults around me to death with the wooden sword.”
This, too, was…well, maybe understandable? After all, there might be someone who’d obtain a nice sword and suddenly be struck by the urge to test it on people. However, it was certainly a rare occurrence for a five-year-old to then use the wooden sword to beat a bunch of grown men to death afterward.
“I was ecstatic… Thinking back on it, I was already on the wrong path then.”
Sadly, at the time, he was correct in terms of his skill. The moment Suiboku got his hands on a wooden sword, he became the most powerful man in that village.

“…How tragic,” Paulette somehow managed to say the words. There were all sorts of things wrong with the story, but it was still a tragedy. Though, to them, it felt less like an actual tragic event and more like a tale told about some mythical hero.
“Mm.”
Having heard that far into the story, the ordinary people in the group had already figured out what had happened. Suiboku had simply maintained that same feeling, that same mindset, over the next several thousand years.
“After becoming the apprentice to an Immortal of Hanafuda named Master Kacho, I met Fukei, who had already been training under Master Kacho for five hundred years. I found his overbearing attitude annoying and beat him up with my wooden sword… In hindsight, I shouldn’t have done that.”
The second anecdote was just as absurd as the first. Yes, based on the first anecdote, it wasn’t surprising that he would take that sort of action. It wasn’t surprising, but it was preposterous.
“A f-five-hundred-year-old Immortal when you were FIVE?!”
Happine couldn’t help but ask the question. Five hundred years old was the same age that Sansui currently was. It would be as though Lain beat Sansui up with a wooden sword, so it felt all the more absurd because of it.
“Yes… When I was young, I had no doubt in my belief that beating up people I didn’t like was the very symbol of strength…”
Fukei behaving as though he was Suiboku’s big brother from the start had annoyed Suiboku, so he decided to beat him up. And so, beat him up he did. It made a certain amount of sense.
“Of course, a big part of it was the fact that Fukei hadn’t trained in any martial arts at that point. Not every Immortal is strong, nor are they necessarily skilled in battle.”
“Um… So, your teacher, Master Kacho, didn’t try to stop that?”
Saiga, who had received instruction from Sansui, ventured to ask as the question had popped up in his head. Of course, based on the story so far, it wouldn’t have surprised him if Suiboku had beaten up Kacho, as well.
“Ah, yes. Master Kacho did stop me. As I continued to happily beat on the unconscious Fukei, he said, ‘That’s enough. You might end up killing him,’ and gently dissuaded me from hitting him.”
Just what does it mean to be gentle? Sure, Kacho might have been gentle in persuading Suiboku, but he didn’t show any kindness to Fukei at that point. All of them wondered why Kacho hadn’t stepped in much earlier.
“After which, I began my training under Master Kacho. After about fifty years, I’d surpassed Fukei in the Immortal Arts. I’m sure that that wounded Fukei’s pride, but I also made sure to wound his body. I often tested the techniques I learned on Fukei,” Suiboku said with a tone of regret, adding that he felt in hindsight that he’d done something cruel.
Suiboku’s listeners agreed with the characterization of Fukei’s treatment as cruel, but when Suiboku said it so sadly, they shrank back in fear.

“Thinking back on it, I suppose I took Fukei for granted. I thought at the time that I was allowed to do anything I wanted to Fukei… It’s unforgivable,” the man who had done those unforgivable acts murmured. “Once I had finished learning Master Kacho’s techniques, I went to learn techniques from other Immortals. Unlike Fukei or myself, normal Immortals don’t learn all of the Arts like Flash Step or Shifting Heavens, but instead usually focus upon a single discipline. Because I wanted to learn all of the Arts available to Immortals, I needed to find other Immortals to teach me.”
If there was one thing that was worthy of praise about the young Suiboku, it was that he was an extraordinarily driven individual. Although Saiga possessed ki, he had no desire to spend decades or even centuries learning the Immortal Arts.
But Suiboku never tired of learning new techniques, no matter how many he learned, and continued to train and acquire new ones, even despite knowing that it would require an enormous amount of effort. This constant desire for self-improvement was the only admirable quality about the man in the stories about him.
“Then, after I had committed countless abuses, I had acquired all of the techniques that I could learn on Hanafuda. It had been a thousand years since I began my training under Master Kacho… Having completed my training, which had felt both like an eternity and an instant…”
Now Suiboku was finally going to reveal why he destroyed his homeland.
“I decided to start my journey off with a bang, and destroyed my homeland in the process.”
The reason Suiboku gave wasn’t a reason at all.
“To be able to demolish an island of that size… I was proud of just how strong I’d become. As I puffed out my chest in pride at that accomplishment, Fukei swore vengeance. That, some day, he would force me to suffer the consequences of my hubris.”
And this was how things finally led back to the battle between the two Immortals. The audience couldn’t help but understand Fukei’s motivations. Yes, Suiboku’s apprentice, and those who were trained by him, were certainly evil — vermin, even, who should have been destroyed.
“It was my fault.”
They also understood right then just why Suiboku had offered his head to Fukei and why Fukei had refused to simply take it. Suiboku had tried to atone for his sins by having Fukei kill him, but Fukei didn’t feel that was nearly enough punishment. Death wasn’t enough of a reckoning for Fukei to forgive Suiboku. Fukei wanted to humiliate Suiboku.
It was only through defeating Suiboku, who had always viewed himself as superior to Fukei, that Fukei could break Suiboku’s pride. Fukei had no interest in a Suiboku who had admitted his sins and waited quietly to be beheaded.
In his five hundred years of training, Sansui had matured mentally, perhaps to the point of becoming elderly in outlook. The dangers of an Immortal who

didn’t grow in that way were clear based on Suiboku’s recollection. Further, they had seen a demonstration of that danger.
“Everything is my fault.”
The world’s most powerful man regretted his sins.
“Yep... You’re right about that.”
Ukyou was the only one who actually voiced his agreement, but everyone felt the same. It was all Suiboku’s fault. Surprisingly, shockingly, even ridiculously so.

Part 11 — Disgraceful

And so the long night came to an end. The lid that had enveloped the entire Arcana Kingdom and Domino Republic had dissipated after Suiboku converted the storm clouds into light and used them to send Fukei off from this world.
The sun lit a cloudless blue sky. Warm light flooded in from the windows for the first time in days. Having noticed the radiance, people hurriedly left their homes to go outside.
When they gazed up at the sky...
“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”
The earth and sky had flipped over. Floating upside-down above them was a giant forest.
Of course, it wasn’t the entire Arcana Kingdom that had been covered by the giant woods, but rather just the fortified city on the eastern edge of the Caputo territories. The presence of the forest was Suiboku’s attempt to be thoughtful. Fukei’s Shifting Heavens Art had battered the entire area with an overwhelming amount of hail. Without the forest, there was a chance the fortified city would have been annihilated.
Of course, without Suiboku, Fukei wouldn’t have attacked in the first place. At any rate, it was thanks to Suiboku that the fortified city had survived.
Given that the battle had ended during the night, there was no reason to continue holding the woods over the city. Ordinarily, he should have done something about the forest before sunrise to keep the city’s inhabitants from panicking.
“Zzz...”
However, Suiboku was fast asleep.
He had grown into an adult to fight Fukei, but now he had returned to his form as a child in order to rest. He slept so soundly that it was difficult to believe he had just killed his brother apprentice the night before. It appeared that his confession and cry after the battle had exhausted him, and he had fallen asleep immediately after. As such, he was dozing directly on the battlefield, but he didn’t seem uncomfortable in the slightest.
“Oh right, Sansui doesn’t handle nights very well either...” Douve murmured her observation.
While Sansui didn’t possess even an atom of hunger or lust, he still got as sleepy as any other person. If he was forced to stay up an entire night, he

always looked tired the morning after. While some Immortals could get by without sleep, it had evidently become part of Sansui's daily routine, and the same was probably true of his master Suiboku.
Having the world's most powerful man suddenly fall asleep presented everyone else with a quandary. In the intervening time, Noah and Vajra had recovered and returned to their human forms, and the sun had come up as they all tried to figure out what to do next.
"I figured he'd wake up when the sun rose..."
Rising from the direction of the Domino Republic, the sun lit the thoroughly destroyed battlefield.
As Shouzo noted, Suiboku and Sansui ordinarily woke up with the sunrise, but it seemed that Suiboku having stayed up late meant that he still needed more sleep.
"...It'd probably be better if he just stayed that way."
"Yeah."
Vajra and Noah, who had experienced first-hand the consequences of Suiboku engaging in battle, were too afraid of even the sleeping Immortal to even think about interfering with him. That was also true of the others present; although they wanted him to wake up, they were too scared to actually wake him.
Sansui had sound judgment — or, rather, he was loyal to his duties — and reacted like any mortal would to differences in social rank. That was why he didn't complain whenever House Sepaeda treated him with a certain lack of care.
But this was Suiboku, the Berserker God. If forcibly waking him was to drive him into a berserk fury, there would be even more damage than had been incurred during Fukei's rampage. No one could say with certainty that such a result couldn't happen.
"We can't simply leave him like this. The people are in trouble."
As Paulette noted, the residents of the fortified city were feeling an even greater sense of impending doom than they had from the storm clouds. With the light from the sun and the high visibility from the cloudless sky, no doubt it was even more terrifying than what they had felt during the deep darkness.
"...Screw it, I'll wake him up. Especially since I bear the most responsibility."
Ukyou steeled himself and moved to wake Suiboku. It had all started because Ukyou had handed Vajra to Fukei, after all. Of course, he understood intellectually that any resistance from him wouldn't have done any good, but even then, Ukyou was morally responsible.
"I praise your determination, my master! No doubt it takes more than a typical amount of courage to wake Suiboku even after witnessing his strength!" Elixir thus praised Ukyou, and the others present looked upon Ukyou with respect.

Could they bring themselves to wake the Berserker God even if their survival was assured? He would probably wake up eventually, and nothing would really happen if they just let him sleep. Ukyou was going to try to wake a man who could destroy the world just to reassure the people of the fortified city. It wasn't that he was brave because he possessed Elixir; it was because he had a strong will, one heedless of danger, that he was allowed to be Elixir's wielder.
"Wait!"
But there was someone who objected to his actions: Eckesachs. Evidently in quite a panic, she tried to prevent Ukyou from waking Suiboku.
"Don't wake Suiboku!"
"...Explain."
Eckesachs had spent even more time with Suiboku than Sansui had. Her opinion was worth heeding. Perhaps waking him from his slumber was the thing Suiboku couldn't stand, something he detested more than anything else?
"Suiboku's sleeping so peacefully! He's adorable! Don't wake him up! That's cruel!"
"Hey, Vajra, grab Eckesachs, will you?"
"With pleasure."
Vajra happily obeyed Ukyou, the heartless master who had calmly handed her over to a bandit. It was his fault that she had been forced to face off against Suiboku, that which she feared more than anything in the world. And yet, Vajra happily obeyed Ukyou's orders. It was probably because the order was something she wanted to do anyway.
"W-Wait! What are you doing, Vajra?"
"We don't have time to humor you, Eckesachs."
Vajra grabbed the diminutive Eckesachs from behind, putting her into a restraining hold and lifting her off the ground. At a glance, it looked like Vajra was bullying the smaller girl, but no one moved to stop her.
"Yo, Master Suiboku. Mind waking up?" Ukyou said, shaking the slumbering Suiboku to wake him.
"Mm."
Suiboku sat up smoothly.
"Mr, mrrr..."
He showed no sign of anger, even as he stretched and checked his own body. Suiboku glanced around at those gathered around him and evidently grasped the situation.
"Ah, I see. Sorry, sorry."
Suiboku casually moved his palm and the forest immediately flipped right-side up, even as it remained floating in the air.
"Mm... Is that better?"
The forest moved away from its position above the fortified city and slowly came to rest over an area far from any people. Suiboku had thus moved

around the lands he had spent fifteen hundred years in as though he were moving his own hands and feet.
“Now, time to deal with the other matters.”
A mere glance showed him the utterly destroyed terrain around him. There were countless large and small chunks of earth floating about, and numerous pieces of hail partially embedded in the craters carved into the ground.
“Hrmph!”
The terrain was still filled with Fukei’s ki, and so Suiboku used that ki to return the terrain to normal. The floating earth melded with the scraps of dirt and then began filling in the great holes in the ground. Although the land remained the wasteland formed by Shouzo’s magical tilling, at least there were no longer any randomly levitating pieces of earth strewn about it.
“Wow…”
Saiga looked upon the only Art that he couldn’t learn and was thoroughly impressed. It had been a constant string of surprises, and he had no other words left to describe what he saw. The earth itself was shifting under the morning sun. The bright light made it all the easier to see what was actually happening in real time.
“Hrm.”
Evidently he couldn’t make the ice melt on command, and so Suiboku broke the hailstones down into small particles and then lifted them into the air. They would probably eventually evaporate quickly enough, and then become part of the clouds.
“There… Sorry about that.”
As he conducted his work, Suiboku apologized to everyone, particularly to Paulette.
“I should have done this before I slept… My apologies.”
Since the work was simple enough for an Immortal who could control the heavens and earth like their own hands and feet, fixing those problems had evidently slipped Suiboku’s mind after experiencing all that emotional fatigue in the battle’s aftermath. Of course, for those caught up in all of it, the wait had still been quite troublesome.
“Sorry? Really…?”
“Mm… Apologies.”
Ukyou had gone beyond anger into exasperation. Just how had Suiboku survived this long while also being so careless?
“Hey, Eckesachs. Has Master Suiboku always been like this?” Saiga asked his own sword, once again experiencing disappointment with Suiboku.
“Of course not! He was even worse!” Eckesachs yelled at him. She was raising her voice for some reason, which seemed rather odd. “Isn’t that right, Suiboku? You used to cause more problems for other people in the past, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Thinking back on it, I lived quite a sinful life. I’ve lost count of the number of memorials I created in penance.”
It wasn’t that he showed no remorse whatsoever, really. It was just that, considering the sheer extent of how destructive his rampages had been, he wasn’t showing much remorse at all.
“You saw how Fukei was raining down snow and hail, yes? There was a time when I was searching for a way to manipulate cold with the Immortal Arts to use in combat. As such, Eckesachs and I went deep into the mountains to practice.”
It seemed that when Suiboku and Eckesachs were traveling the world, they hadn’t spent all of their time wandering. Evidently, whenever Suiboku came upon a problem he wanted to solve, he’d buckle down and train for an extended period, albeit a short one by Immortal standards.
“It wasn’t as big as the storm clouds that Vajra and Fukei had created, but I used Eckesachs to maintain the storm clouds and tried various things like making it snow… In the end, I came to the conclusion that I couldn’t use the Immortal Arts to freeze my opponent in combat.”
Happine, Douve, and Paulette were all reminded of the Academy Regent. Yes, the history of magic, more specifically the history of failures in magic. Suiboku’s Immortal Arts were the same, and it was likely he had done an enormous amount of trial and error.
“You see, what I wanted to do was to be able to instantly freeze an opponent with a burst of ki. But I found that, to freeze my opponent, I needed to either throw them into a cloud or otherwise face an idiot who would walk through an endless blizzard to come find me deep in the mountains.”
Because the Immortal Arts controlled natural phenomena, it was impossible to suddenly freeze someone like Shouzo could do with his magic. That was because any freezing effect made with the Immortal Arts was just an artificial blizzard. While he could use it to ice his opponent up through exposure over time, Suiboku couldn’t just instantly freeze them solid.
“When I figured out that it was impossible, Eckesachs and I left the mountain, but…”
“We’d been training for about ten years straight. As such, the mountain and the land around it had been completely frozen over, and the countries around the mountain had been laid waste by the cold snap.”
The characteristics of weather manipulation through the Immortal Arts meant that while there was little in the way of instantaneous effect; the area of effect was large and it lasted for a long time. Therefore, it was pretty much impossible to limit the effect of his techniques to just the mountain he was training on. Although he hadn’t had any knowledge of it at the time, Suiboku had ended up affecting the entire region around him.
“Which was why I created a memorial as a way to calm the souls of the victims and as a symbol of my regret. It was my way of mourning them.”
“Even I felt bad about that…”

He hadn’t meant any harm or possessed any malicious intent. However, the fact that he wasn’t aware of the damage he caused, that he hadn’t meant to cause it, didn’t absolve him of the sheer damage he had done.
Had he and Fukei fought at that time, it would have been exactly the battle Fukei had hoped for. Suiboku was now a calm, ordinary Immortal, but at the time he had frozen the mountain, he was a force of nature, and an evil force of nature at that. Even without ill intent, he was still a walking calamity.
“Let’s see, other times... Ah, there was a period where I had cut out a mountain from the ground and carried it around with me, but... While an object will float forever after I levitate it, moving it requires staying close to the levitating object. As such, I needed to lead it like it was a dog.”
Because he had spent a thousand years wandering, it seemed he had quite a few examples of failure. There were also probably countless incidents that happened that he had been completely oblivious to.
“But there was nothing interesting about defeating an opponent by slamming a mountain against them or crushing them with it, so I decided it was all a waste. I put the mountain back where I had found it, but...”
“After using my Art on the mountain peak and then hiking back down, I saw a road that hadn’t been there when I had grabbed the mountain. Then, when I looked around...there were houses crushed underneath...!”
This just sounded like a horror story. A mountain coming down from the sky on top of a village was the stuff of horror stories, but for some reason the man who had actually done it described it like he had found the outcome frightening as well.
“My hypothesis was that humans had built a new road through the area because the mountain had vanished, and eventually a city sprang up there. However, it ended up being crushed when Suiboku brought the mountain back, and the city was completely wiped out,” Eckesachs recounted.
“I felt terribly guilty about it, so I built a memorial there and mourned the lost.”
Suiboku evidently believed that building memorials served as a way of expiating his sins or something. Rather than building shrines and trying to calm the spirits, he probably should have spent more time thinking *before* he acted and averted those horrible results.
“Ah, that reminds me... There was a place called Tempera Village... It was a village filled with clans that used martial arts developed for special bloodlines.”
Ran suddenly remembered something about her village. There was a memorial in the middle of the town square that had supposedly been built by a berserker god.
“When I was going around challenging people, I ended up turning the entire village against me...and I ended up massacring everyone. When I think back on it, that was such a waste.”

Everyone felt the warm respect they had previously held toward Suiboku rapidly cooling and losing its luster. It seemed that only Suiboku had correctly understood what exactly he was.
“I really...wanted Fukei to kill me...”
Yes, he was a man who was better off dead.
“Now, with that said.”
The man who was better off dead changed the subject. While no one would die so long as he was describing the past, the moment the man acted, there would be terrible consequences. He had shown by his own words and actions that chaos followed in his wake.
“I’m going to go apologize to the king or such of the Arcana Kingdom. What do you all plan to do?”
The king or such of the Arcana Kingdom. It was a sloppy description and made Suiboku sound far from a man who intended to bow his head in apology.
But like Sansui, Suiboku was a man who had retreated to the woods before the Arcana Kingdom had even been founded. It was completely natural that he had no familiarity with the country.
The reason he said “the king or such” was because he wasn’t certain the kingdom actually had a king. Since it was a kingdom, there was probably a king, but it could very well have a queen regnant, or the throne could be empty, with a regent ruling instead. It was an area in which he was ignorant, so his sloppiness was unavoidable.
“Y-You intend to meet with His Majesty?”
“Yes, I need to apologize to him. Look there.”
Although Suiboku had restored most of the terrain, he gestured to the great split in the ground that had formed from the slash from his storm-cloud sword.
“While I regret it, I simply couldn’t fix this. I need to apologize — not simply for my friend, but for the fact that I split the kingdom from here to beyond the horizon,” Suiboku said, answering Paulette’s question with all earnestness. Given the sheer scale of what he had done, the only person he could apologize to was the ruler of the entire kingdom.
Still, one couldn’t just meet with the king. Suiboku might be an Immortal over four thousand years of age, but given that he had no social status in Arcanian society, he would probably be arrested if he tried to enter the palace. Of course, since Suiboku was strong, he would probably just kill anyone who tried to arrest him.
I wonder how many people will end up dead as a result.
Everyone present imagined the tragedy that might unfold.
“...Mm? Ah, yes, the king or such should be aware of me. I spoke to Pandora’s wielder on the way here and he mentioned he’d be making a report,” Suiboku explained, as everyone around him fretted over what might happen.

“Even Fukei would have no choice but to die against Pandora. Of course, even if I had left Pandora’s wielder to his journey, I would have arrived first, but that would have been insensitive. So I bowed and scraped in front of him to allow me to deal with Fukei.”
“So His Majesty is aware that Master Suiboku was dealing with the situation?”
“Yes.”
Evidently the situation was more organized than they had thought. Still, they were all concerned about leaving Suiboku to meet the king on his own.
“So, what will you all do? I’ll be going, even if it means going by myself.”
“…”
The others exchanged glances. They were afraid of sending Suiboku off on his own, but they were also afraid of accompanying him. On the third hand, given that Suiboku’s power exceeded Fukei’s, they were also afraid of simply letting him do what he wanted while they weren’t looking.
“…Alright.”
Again, Ukyou took the lead.
“I’ll go. Either way, I need to go report that Vajra was taken from me, and apologize to the king as well.”
Although Domino was Arcana’s client state, Ukyou was still a sovereign ruler. He wasn’t incompetent or foolish enough to let the silence linger for long.
“Paulette, Shouzo. No doubt you have work to do here in Caputo. I’m sure the people of the fortified city in particular are still dealing with their trauma.”
“Y-Yes, you’re right! Then we’ll stay here, as you suggest!”
“…Oh, then, me too. I’ll stay as well.”
Even if Ukyou technically had no authority, it was a relief to the others that there was an actual ruler here to take charge. Saiga went so far as to gaze upon Ukyou with admiration.
“Saiga, since you wield Eckesachs, you’re coming with me. We need someone to entertain Master Suiboku, after all.”
“Y-Yes, of course!”
“As for everyone else, I suppose you don’t have any particular reason to accompany me. Go ahead and decide if you’ll be coming or if you’ll be going to the royal capital on your own.”
It was here that Happine and Douve exchanged glances. They were the only ones present who could decide the next steps they would take.
“If Saiga’s going, then I’m going too!”
“Yes, there’s no reason for me to stand to one side here.”
The two noblewomen were daughters of martial Houses, and couldn’t use fear as an excuse to stay out of Suiboku’s presence. Given that the two that were symbolic leaders among the group and had decided to stick around, the others all steeled themselves to their fate.
“Seems like we’ve come to a conclusion. Then…”

Suiboku’s Immortal Arts lifted everyone other than Paulette and Shouzo up off the ground. In a mere moment, they were floating toward Suiboku’s home, the floating woods.
“Shall we head off to see the king...or whoever?”

Chapter 2 — The Age of the Sword Apostle

Part 12 — Intentions

So, from here forward, it's back to my story.

The Arcana Kingdom had been engulfed completely in storm clouds, making it impossible to tell whether it was day or night. Having watched over the situation at the Wynne Family estate, I witnessed the clouds vanish and the bright light that followed.

"Seems it's over."

The star-filled night appeared for the first time in several days. It was as though a wind had blown through and swept the sky clear of clouds. In all honesty, I was caught by surprise when I felt the ki of anyone other than my master and myself.

That presence had then proceeded to manipulate the weather on an enormous scale. Even if that Immortal was doing it with Vajra's help, it was still something that I could have never done myself, even with Vajra. The Immortal must have been someone who had trained as long or even longer than my master.

At the same time, I felt a certain corruption in that ki. Since my experience is limited to sensing the ki of myself and my master, I couldn't be certain, but it felt like the other Immortal was ill in some fashion. The illness wasn't a physical one, but a psychological one.

No doubt the possessor of that ki was an acquaintance of my master, and he had picked up his illness because he had hated him for an extraordinarily long time. Further, based on what the Sacred Treasures had said about my master, it seemed he was quite a hellion back in the day.

Still, as his apprentice, I didn't want to learn that nearly everyone who knew my master hated him in some fashion. That was particularly true this time, since I felt a clear malice directed at him. It must have been someone who knew my master when he was still in training. I could understand that well enough.

"W-Was that…lightning?"

Blois, who was standing by my side at the time, was shocked at the enormous pillar of lightning that had just flashed past us. It had passed so quickly there wasn't any trace of it left in its wake, but it had burned its afterimage into our eyes.

It was a blow that was, quite literally, capable of splitting the entire country in two. As his apprentice, all I could do was praise my master's ability.

"It's my master's greatest technique, where he compresses all of the clouds near him and unleashes their power in a single blow. I'd heard of it before…but I never thought I'd see it with my own eyes…"

Since I knew that my master was monstrously powerful, I was confident I wouldn't be shocked regardless of what he did. Blois, on the other hand,

had only met him once, and it seems she hadn't been able to get a complete impression of his power, so no doubt she's shocked in more ways than one.
"So, that was Master Suiboku's most powerful technique... If you kept training, would you be able to do it, as well?"
"...Well, my master has no intention of teaching it to me. It seems it's a technique he developed in his youth."
According to my master, weather manipulation as a whole wasn't suited for use in combat. It takes a significant amount of time to create the storm clouds in the first place, and then you need to carry them around with you. There's nothing you can do if you're attacked while you're creating the storm, and once you've used it, you'd have to secure another supply. As such, you can't use it while you're preparing it, and thus you can only really run away from your opponent.
If my master had only focused on teaching me that technique, I wouldn't be able to serve as a bodyguard.
"That's a technique that can only be used in a duel, after all."
The Immortal who had prepared the storm clouds clearly meant to fight a duel with my master. He had spent an unimaginable amount of time training solely in preparation to face him. Then, after he'd taken Vajra, he'd spent weeks creating storm clouds...then used them in the fight. Even then, he wasn't able to actually accomplish anything.
"Still, considering the scale of that Rare Art...there might be some collateral damage."
"I can't imagine my master making that sort of mistake, but...even setting that aside, I'm sure my master's feeling quite apologetic."
An old acquaintance had come to kill him, stole Vajra from the Domino Republic, and covered the entirety of the Arcana Kingdom in storm clouds. Ultimately, he himself had split the Arcana Kingdom in two.
"He'll at least go make his apologies."
"I have to admit that an apology for splitting the country feels a bit strange. If he's feeling apologetic, he really shouldn't have done it in the first place."
"If he hadn't used that technique, those clouds would have all turned to rain."
"...I suppose you have a point."
Because my master had compressed all of that energy into a single blow, he had split the country in half. However, if he hadn't used that technique, the clouds would have simply come down on the kingdom as endless torrential rain. They would have quite literally washed it all away.
"My master will probably be waiting for me when I get back to the royal capital. I never thought I'd reunite with him like this... My intention was to avoid meeting him again until Lain was all grown up..."
"You don't want to see him?"
"No, that's not it at all. I do want to meet him. There's no reason I wouldn't want to see my master."

I’m often called the Arcana Kingdom’s most powerful swordsman, but it’s a little embarrassing to have that moniker when I’m aware of my master’s ability. Still, though, it’s nice to have the fruits of my training praised by others.
It’s been five years since I started serving House Sepaeda. Lord Sepaeda trusts me, and I’ve been tasked not only to serve as a bodyguard, but then as an instructor. I, too, had a lot of things I wanted to report to my master.
“But there is something I’ve thought about as I’ve accumulated accomplishments after leaving my master. What does Master Suiboku himself think about his own master?”
I’m fine with meeting my master. I have nothing that I wouldn’t want him to learn. But what about him? My master had his own master for his Immortal Arts, and no doubt he learned a lot from them. With that in mind, does my master feel that he couldn’t face the people of his own homeland?
Everyone who knows of my master’s past all say that he’s quite different from the man he once was. The man they describe is far too different from the wonderful master that I know. Perhaps my master was ashamed of his past, and wants to keep it separated from his present.
“Blois, I have a home to return to as well. It’s not just House Sepaeda; my master’s side is also a place for me to return to, eventually. But perhaps my master doesn’t have a place to go home to…”
“…Yes, that’s probably true. But that’s probably something that can be fixed. When I met him, your master appeared to be a virtuous man. Of course, he may have just been pretending to be virtuous, but he was an admirable master over the five hundred years you were with him, right? If he could maintain it for five hundred years, then that’s who he is, not some facade. I’m sure he can settle the matter on his own.”
“…I hope so.”
But this was another matter entirely.
Blois had been able to resolve her rift with her family, but that was because she bore no responsibility for that rift in the first place. She had served as a bodyguard for House Sepaeda, and that had allowed her family to live a prosperous life.
While her older brother and sister felt conflicted about their feelings for Blois, they still appreciated her work. That should go without saying, since Blois had done nothing wrong, and also because her older brother and sister were, in their way, happy to some extent.
But what if my master had committed terrible acts in the past and if the victims were still suffering? If that was the case, then that flash of light wasn’t simply a way to deal with the storm clouds, but another layer of sin that my master had added to his accumulated burden. If his homeland is filled with nothing but people that he had made miserable, then there was nothing that could be done for him. That was the very definition of a situation that was too far gone to salvage.
“…Blois.”

“What?”
“We both had our share of struggles as we served as Lady Douve’s bodyguards, didn’t we?”
“Yeah, quite.”
Risking your life to protect the daughter of House Sepaeda was an extremely difficult job. Part of the problem was Lady Douve’s awful personality, but the role itself was also very demanding.
“Still, those days weren’t wasted. We may have hurt a lot of people in the process, but we were also protecting someone.”
“…True.”
We had protected Lady Douve, and in exchange, our families had been taken care of by House Sepaeda. That was an exchange of services, perhaps, but it was still something we should appreciate. As the Lord and the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda had bowed their heads to me in thanks, I, too, owe them my gratitude.
“No matter what everyone around you thinks, it’s good to be a little humble.”
“…I think you’re a little too humble, honestly.”
“Don’t complicate the subject… I’m trying to tie things together.”
“Then at least make your intentions a little clearer?”
“…In the past, my master probably lived thinking only about himself. He acted according to whether or not what he was doing was entertaining for him. That was why he…drew so much scorn upon himself.”
Evidently my master used to do whatever he wanted, without any regard to what happened to anyone else. As a result, he hadn’t made anyone happy, even himself.
“Yeah, long-seated hatred is a scary thing.”
“Yep, especially given that, at a minimum, he’s accumulated at least fifteen hundred years of hatred.”
“Of course, holding a grudge for that long is pretty bad too…”
“True. It takes an enormous amount of dedication to hate anyone for that length of time.”
I can say this with confidence, since I’ve lived for five hundred years, but holding a grudge for fifteen hundred years would require tremendous hatred. Unless something particularly terrible had happened, you’d just stop caring about the grudge after a certain length of time.
“I don’t know if this is the right way to phrase it, but time heals most wounds. Unless someone killed you or Lain, I don’t think I’d be able to hold a grudge for even a hundred years.”
“…If an Immortal killed me, could you hate them for a thousand years?”
“I’m pretty sure I’d hold that grudge for ten thousand years.”
“Really…?”
Blois smiles faintly, as though she’s pleased by the thought.
“Hey, Sansui, you didn’t do anything this time, right?”

“Not a single thing. I knew that my master would act, and I was on vacation, after all. And…”
“And?”
“And…considering what might happen, I wanted to be here.”
“To protect us?”
“Yes.”
I had guessed that the weather was going to be manipulated on a massive scale the moment I detected the Immortal’s ki. In the end, there had been no damage aside from the pitch-black skies, but the possibility of something going wrong had still existed. If that had happened, would Blois and Lain have been safe without me by their side?
“If I’m honest, there was a part of me that wondered if I needed to return to the royal capital. I wanted to protect Lady Douve, and there were also Saiga and Tahlan to consider.”
“But you stayed because…”
“Because the people I need to protect more than anyone else are you and Lain.”
I’m sure His Brothership, His Fathership, and even Lady Douve understood that. That was probably why they made no attempt to recall me. Of course, they had probably struggled with that idea, but that was true of me, too.
“I see… Honestly, I’m happy to hear that.”
It goes without saying, but Blois is still quite powerful. If she holds a sword in her hand and wields her Wind Magic, she’s still as strong as a Royal Guardsman. All the same, she’ll probably gradually lose her strength from here on out. There’s no pressing need for her to train, and she’ll be far from the front lines. The strength that she had spent so much effort to obtain would quickly be lost.
That’s fine, though. Blois has already fulfilled her duty.
“I guess I’m now someone to be protected rather than a protector.”
“Yeah, exactly.”
No matter how strong I am, there are those who are stronger, and I can’t protect everything, I can only be in one place at one time, after all. Of course, I’m currently House Sepaeda’s strong right arm, and otherwise just a swordsman. But since I’m on vacation, I want to prioritize my family over everything else.
“Say, Sansui… What if the country were at risk, and your master wasn’t going to act? Would you protect me, or the kingdom?”
“That’s a mean question…”
Of course, she isn’t asking the question in earnest. It’s just that she wants to hear me say it. In that sense, there’s a part of Lady Douve that has rubbed off on her.
“I’ll protect both with all my might. I promise.”
“Good. I’m happy to hear it.”
It was then that I remembered what first drove me to become a swordsman: I wanted to become strong in order to protect cute girls. Of course, I hadn’t

wanted to spend this much effort to obtain that strength, but I am extremely proud of the fact that I now have the strength to protect the people who are most precious to me.

Part 13 — The Way Home

The next morning, the storm clouds that had probably covered the entire Arcana Kingdom had vanished and bright skies had appeared over the Wynne Family estate for the first time in several days. The people who had holed up in the house had been released from their uncertainty and raised their voices in celebration. Of course, there will probably be some damage from the days of dark cloud cover, but I'm sure they'll be able to deal with it.

After all, despite days of gloomy storm clouds engulfing the sky, daily life had returned without any incidents of note.

Of course, that was probably all caused by an acquaintance of my master coming to kill him. Thinking about it that way, I couldn't help but be extremely uncomfortable. Since I fully understood that it was all my master's fault, I felt profound guilt over all the auras of people rejoicing.

At any rate, now that the skies have cleared, we should probably head back to the royal capital as well. Even though we haven't received orders to do so, it isn't good to be idle for too long. Since we've already reported our engagement, there wasn't really any other reason to stay any longer, so the three of us decided to return at once.

"We would have preferred to spend a little more time here, but we'll be heading back to the royal capital for now."

The three of us and the five members of Blois's family have gathered so we can say goodbye to them. It went without saying that I had explained everything about the storm clouds to the family when I had detected the presence of the Immortal. Since His Brothership and His Majesty couldn't have detected what had happened themselves, the people who first grasped the situation other than my master were the people gathered here. Of course, it's not like we could do anything just because we had grasped the situation.

"Very well... Then please give my regards to His Lordship."

Blois's father, Senve Wynne, bows his head to me.

"I'm glad you stayed with us during this incident, but still, it's best not to offend His Lordship either. While I regret that you can't stay longer, it's probably for the best that you leave a little early."

He sees us off with a very reasonable response. After all, there is not a thing to be gained by earning His Lordship's ire.

"Blois... Since you finally finished your service, make sure you don't do anything to offend His Lordship."

Blois's mother, Kette Wynne, was also worried about offending His Lordship and the rest of House Sepaeda. While it feels to me like they're a little too worried about this particular thing, since their lives depended upon House

Sepaeda's approval, I can't blame them. But, just as we're about to take our leave, the feeling that we were about to be separated from the Wynne family is suddenly broken. We would continue to live our lives concerned about the approval of Lady Douve and the others.
"May I accompany you to the royal capital?"
Blois's older sister, Chette Wynne, is a woman facing the prospect of her fading youth and is a tad emotionally unstable for that reason.
"I mean... If Master Sansui's teacher has caused problems for the Arcana Kingdom, surely he'll have prepared something in apology, yes?"
She's certainly honest about her own desires. There's something impressive about it, and how capable she is of imagining the most convenient outcome for herself. It's a bad sort of optimistic, but considering the gloom she had been immersed in just days before, I suppose it's an improvement.
"He might offer a strange medicine capable of restoring youth...!"
"...Father, I intend to accompany Chette as well. There would be nothing unusual about me meeting with Master Sansui's father figure, Master Suiboku, in your stead, yes?"
Blois's older brother, Hetter Wynne, thus proposes accompanying his older sister and keeping an eye on her. It seems that he has determined that it's pointless to try to stop Chette, or that if he does stop her, she'll return to her depression from a few days ago.
"I see... Lyra, what do you think?"
"Yes, Lyra. What do you think we should do?"
The parents, without batting an eye, check with their youngest daughter on whether or not to approve the proposal posed by their son and heir. Hetter looked hurt, but it seems he is sufficiently aware of his own failings that he can't bring himself to show his anger.
"Since both Big Brother and Big Sister might cause problems for Master Sansui, I'll accompany them as well."
"That's a relief."
"Yes. Lyra's very wise, after all."
Blois's younger sister, Lyra Wynne, is the youngest daughter, and the child that the parents seem to trust implicitly.
"Master Sansui, if Lyra determines that Hetter or Chette are doing something foolish, please feel free to beat them into submission."
"Lyra, if you think things might be dangerous, make sure you ask him to hit them, alright? After all, it's too late to do anything once things have already gone wrong."
Um, should I really hit Blois's older siblings? I still have some doubts about that, but after further thought, it occurs to me that I have frequently hit both the current Lord Sepaeda, His Brothership, and the previous Lord Sepaeda, His Fathership.
Thinking about it that way, perhaps hitting fools to make them behave is something that all of House Sepaeda engages in. It's a practice that was worthy of a martial House, I guess, but it felt more like something samurai

families would do. I suppose it's a little bit reassuring to know that I can stop them through force, though.
"Father, Mother... Surely that's..."
"Don't be foolish, Hetter! I mean, the better option would be for you to not go at all!"
"Yes. In fact, we'd be justified in beating you right now!"
Yes, it was probably a problem for people who hadn't been invited to just appear at the royal capital and meet with an important personage. But the only one who's in la-la land in her desire to go to the royal capital is Chette, so there was no need to actually knock Hetter out.
"Father, Mother..."
Hetter evidently noticed the same thing, and is trying to object.
"You won't have to be knocked out if you don't go to the royal capital, Big Brother."
"Nrr... Nrrrgh."
"Silly Big Brother. Everyone can see that you want to go."
Lyra really is a bright girl. I can understand why her parents trust her so much.
"Indeed!"
"Exactly!"
Both parents seem to agree. They're actually right; in truth, it would be much easier if the Wynne siblings stayed at the estate. Chette might end up depressed again if she doesn't go, sure, but if the three children all go then they could very well all end up being executed. That's what it means to go to the royal palace uninvited. I mean, Chette actually tried to strangle me a few days ago. It would be completely unacceptable if she did that in the capital.
"It'll be fine, Father, Mother. I'll keep a close watch on Big Brother and Big Sister."
"Could Lyra be...an Immortal?"
It's Lain, herself relatively close in age to Lyra, who is extremely surprised by Lyra's maturity. True, Lyra's calm intelligence seems implausible otherwise.
"I had no idea that my younger sister was this smart..."
Blois, too, is surprised. Of course, so am I.
"Lyra... Why are you the only one getting praised?"
"Because I'm not doing anything I shouldn't do. That's all. Restraint is important, isn't it, Big Brother?"
Yes, restraint is important. Of course, Lyra probably also wants to go to the royal capital herself. At the same time, she doesn't want to go at the expense of her own reputation. She'll tag along this time because she has a reason to do so, but if she didn't, she probably would have calmly accepted staying home.
To put it simply, she is truly capable of making an informed cost-benefit analysis. She would rather deny herself her wish rather than try to push

through by brute force. Ah, in that sense, she's definitely not an Immortal. Lyra herself is probably aware of it, but she'll never actually seek out and pursue the rarefied heights of accomplishment.
Her way of taking no reckless actions is an easy way to live and avoids social tension. While she does taunt her older brother, she does so only to the extent that she knows she'll be forgiven for doing so as mere teasing. She doesn't linger and continue to batter him.
It's a smart way to live. Of course, that also means that she'll seek the ideal solution within the extent of her abilities rather than seek a goal that she needs to exert herself to accomplish.
Putting it positively, she doesn't obsess; putting it negatively, she lacks passion. While she won't ever lose, she won't win either. She's decided to avoid the challenge in the first place. While she is extremely bright, she isn't the sort of person to accomplish any great feats.
In that sense, Hetter was much more promising in terms of talent. The reason Hetter's parents don't regard him particularly highly is because there's no need for a regional lord to be capable of achieving great feats. The man that Hetter wants to meet, coincidentally — Ukyou Fuushi, is a man who is obsession personified.
Perhaps people who achieve great feats are people who willingly seek out stressful situations. Those who climb because they have confidence, and those who understand restraint because of their self-awareness… I'm rather fond of both types of people.
That said, I actually rather dislike people who move to attack others when they are irritated.
"I was hoping to introduce my wife's family to my master, so I would be happy to have all of you accompany me."
"I'm grateful for your consideration… Look what you've done, Hetter, you now owe a debt to Blois's husband!"
"Quite! Think it through more carefully… Owing a debt that you have no expectation of being able to repay!"
"Y-Yes sir, yes ma'am…"
Wow, the parents really are model nobles. Everything they've pointed out is perfectly rational and proper. People who are average but are doing their best... There's no way I could dislike people like that. I've really grown fond of my in-laws.
And so we started on our way home from our honeymoon. Unlike travel by plane or train, a journey by carriage was bound to take several days or even weeks. Of course, we stopped at inns in the various post towns along the way, but that meant Blois, Lain, and I were just experiencing the same journey we'd undertaken on our way over, except in reverse.
After all, we were all nobles, and it wasn't a problem for us to travel using two carriages. Our family was in one carriage, while Blois's siblings were in the other. It meant we didn't have to worry too much about offending them either.

We could even stay at different inns at the post towns, essentially making it as though we were two separate families who just happened to be traveling along the same road. It seemed the three of them intended to be considerate to us, in that regard. Or, rather, evidently the three of them weren't particularly interested in traveling with me.
"I'm sorry that my family's being a bother, Sansui."
"Don't worry about it, Blois. It's a minor thing compared to what my master did."
"I suppose that's true... The sheer type and scale of the trouble is different... There's simply no comparison."
Quite. There is no comparison and they didn't remotely cancel one another out. The fact that Blois's older sister had tried to strangle me and the fact that my master and his friend had almost destroyed this entire kingdom and everyone in it... There was no way that we could both consider our sides at fault and tell the other not to worry about it. If anything, it's simply a situation where we're both feeling guilty. Adding a new wound on top of another wound still left you wounded.
"Papa's master... Hrrm."
Meanwhile, our daughter Lain didn't complain that we weren't being lovey-dovey like she had on the outbound trip. It seems the kingdom having faced destruction didn't leave enough emotional bandwidth for her to worry about the relationship between her mom and dad.
"So... We should be able to see it soon."
"See what?"
"What is it, Papa?"
I peer outside the carriage window and see the forest that brought back all sorts of memories: the forest that is, essentially, my second homeland.
"...Mm? Was there always a forest there?"
Blois's question is perfectly understandable. We can see the forest far off in the distance, after all. It's so large that it can be seen from far, far away. A small forest is one thing, but of course she finds the sudden appearance of a giant forest to be worthy of a little questioning. Of course, it's only a little bit of questioning.
"That's my master's forest."
"Huh? Isn't that near the royal capital?"
"We're still in the Sepaeda territories. Even if we were facing the right way, we shouldn't be able to see it."
This planet is round, just like Earth, so things that are far away are hidden by the planet's curvature. Even if that wasn't the case, if it wasn't a particularly tall mountain, another mountain would get in the way.
However, if something was high up in the air, it can be seen from far away.
"Huh...?"
"Wha...?"

As the carriage slowly made its way along the road, the scenery around us also slowly changed. Once we crested a decently tall hill, it was possible to see that my master's forest was floating in the air.
"In terms of positioning, I think it's right over the royal capital."
"Wow…!"
"For the love of all that's holy…"
It's not a mirage or an illusion. The forest is, in fact, floating in mid-air. It was an Immortal Art of Master Suiboku's, one that allows him to move the earth.
"You know how I have a technique called Feather Step? The mechanics are the same as that. Of course, it's a much, much more advanced version of it."
It goes without saying, but this is the first time I've ever seen it for myself. Even so, I can at least understand the mechanics behind it simply by looking at it from afar. Besides, I already figured it was possible. I mean, I'd spent five hundred years in that forest. I knew the absurd amount of ki that my master had poured into those woods.
"So you'll be able to do that too, Papa?"
"If I practice for a long, long time, yes. But that's far, far into the future."
I think my master is impressive and respect him as my predecessor. But, in all honesty, I have no real desire to learn that technique. I already have enough strength, and I'm happy with what I have.
The time I'm in now is more important to me than some far-off future where Lain and Blois have already left the world. I have plenty I want to do, things I want to do for them, things I need to do, and so I am content with my life. Even as an Immortal, it's much too far in the future to think about what I would do after these days have passed.

Part 14 — In the Palace

At last, we'd finally arrived at the royal capital, which still has a giant forest floating in the air over it.
Despite that, the city is still relatively lively. Much of that is probably attributable to the fact that the forest, unlike the storm clouds of a few days ago, isn't doing any noticeable harm. Moreover, it's so far up in the sky that the people living right underneath it have to crane their heads so far backward that it'll hurt their necks if they actually want to see it.
"It's a lot more normal than I thought it'd be, Papa. I figured everyone would be in a big panic, but it seems they aren't."
As Lain noted, there isn't any particular panic evident among the people, and my return hadn't elicited any particular response either. Nothing had happened, even though the apprentice of the man who is currently levitating a giant forest above them had returned to the capital. Yeah, everything is back to normal.
"…Sansui, just to confirm. What's it like inside the palace?"
"It's a heck of a mess in there. Specifically, everyone there is looking right toward us."

It seems Blois has already realized, but the capital's peace is being maintained through an enormous amount of effort from everyone involved. The people inside the palace are extremely nervous, mostly because my master is in the palace, waiting for me to arrive. They are all afraid of the man who had brought a giant levitating forest and parked it above the capital. That's entirely understandable, given that he can just destroy the city by letting the forest fall whenever he feels like it.
"Everyone's more afraid of my master than I thought they'd be..."
I had expected that they'd be afraid of his power, but I didn't anticipate that even the lords who have Shouzo and I as retainers would be quite this intimidated. I suppose that's because they know we're loyal, but that knowledge doesn't apply to my master.
"Well, of course. I mean, in your case, you'd already established a trusting relationship with Their Lordships before you revealed your true ability. If they'd known you could defeat the entire Royal Guard on your own at the very start, I'm sure they would've been much more wary of you."
"Yeah, that's true."
Although they'd had no idea where I had been born or just how strong I was, they trusted me based on my demeanor and we'd had an easy employer-employee relationship. Before they'd discovered that I'm five hundred years old, anyway.
But, in my master's case, he has already shown that he possesses the ability to easily destroy the kingdom, and they have no real information about his personality to reassure them. Moreover, he'd openly confessed to destroying countless countries in the past. Given that he'd destroyed those countries because they'd irritated him, it was perfectly natural for Their Lordships to be alarmed by his presence.
"Under the circumstances, I'm even more worried about Big Sister and Big Brother. Given just how tense everyone is, if a few vassals were to come visiting on a lark, well... I can't really blame them for how they'll respond to that."
"Yup, that's true..."
"...True."
Blois's parents had been completely correct; if I'd just knocked Chette and Hetter out when they brought up the idea, it'd have saved us all a lot of trouble.
We meet up with the other three at the entrance to the palace and climb down from our carriages.
"Well, well... That really is impressive. To be able to just walk into the palace like this... It's the dream of a lifetime for a country noble like me."
As we feared, Hetter is in a state of nervous excitement. Given that he has always been interested in making a name for himself, I don't doubt that it's a joyful occasion for him to just set foot inside the royal palace. Ordinarily, he'd never be allowed in, and if he tried to force the issue they'd just throw him in the dungeon. That he's just so happy at being able to enter the castle

is probably a sign that he really is a country boy at heart. I suppose there was a time when I was like that too...
“So this is where the gentleman who’s making the forest levitate — Master Sansui’s master — currently is... Given that he can make such a large forest float, surely he can make me younger...”
But setting Hetter aside, Chette was even worse off, completely lost in her own fantasy world. No doubt she’ll be overwhelmed by her emotions when she sees that my master looks younger than I do. While I don’t think my master has a means of making her younger, she’ll probably lose control of herself if her hopes are dashed. If that happens, I’ll have no choice but to knock her out.
“They both just seem...well, stupid. I shouldn’t have come along...”
Lyra looks intensely embarrassed at the sight of her older siblings. Pretty much the same way we feel, really.
“Master Sansui, could you just knock them out and shove them back in the carriage?”
“But nothing’s happened yet.”
“It’ll be too late once something happens... At this rate, all of Blois’s hard work will have been for nothing.”
I understand what Lyra’s feeling. I really, really do. Now that I’ve seen Hetter and Chette, His Brothership and His Fathership seem pretty tame by comparison. In spite of all their issues, they’re still calm and collected when it matters. True, the two lords of House Sepaeda had a tendency to get up to hijinks when there are no pressing matters at hand, but Blois’s two older siblings look about ready to make a spectacular mistake right when it really matters.
“To be so cheery when you haven’t even been invited... You know that if His Lordship’s in a bad mood, getting beheaded is going to be the least of our worries, right?”
“Hahaha! You worry too much, Lyra!”
“That’s right. The capital was so lively, remember?”
“Big Brother, Big Sister, you’re both so oblivious. Why are you making assumptions about people who you’ve never even met?”
This is the point where I begin to regret bringing these two here. I had no idea they’d get this excited just from coming to the capital. While I’m pretty fond of Hetter, it’s for that exact reason that I start to wonder if I shouldn’t just immediately lay him out.
“Master Sword Apostle! You’ve returned!”
With that, the carriage lot is suddenly abuzz with people. A large number of soldiers who are in an anxiously, almost fearfully hurried state have suddenly appeared. Even Hetter and Chette are shocked at the tension they exude.
“Yes, I arrived a few moments ago. It appears His Lordship and my master are here, so I would like to meet with them.”
“I see... Then, please, come with us!”

“His Majesty and the lords of the Four Great Houses are waiting!”
They’re treating me as though I’m long-awaited reinforcements, coming to bail them out of an absolutely desperate predicament. Despite the fact that we’re about to have an audience with the king, they hurry me along as though I’m a doctor rushing to an ER patient. Ushered along by the soldiers, we make our way at a fast walk to the throne room.
“…Ahm, are we about to have an audience with His Majesty the King?”
It seemed the situation had dawned on him midway through the journey, and so Hetter murmurs the question, the color draining from his face. Since he’s accompanying us, yes, that is exactly what is about to happen. Of course, if we were to part ways here, it would mean a vassal of House Sepaeda would be left to wander the palace aimlessly, having arrived uninvited.
“Oh dear… Say, Lyra, does my makeup look alright?”
“It’s fine, Big Sister. No one’s in any state to notice,” Lyra reassures Chette, as the latter frets over her appearance in a frankly misguided fashion. If she’s going to worry about something minor like her makeup, she should probably be more concerned about the much larger reality that she shouldn’t be here in the first place.
“We’ve brought the Sword Apostle!”
The six of us hurriedly entered the throne room. It goes without saying that the king awaited within, flanked by the heads of the Four Great Houses. Blois’s siblings all freeze when they notice that the king and the Four Great Lords are all present. That reaction is probably how they ought to react, given that the five men comprised the top leadership of the Arcana Kingdom. For better or for worse, the three of us — me, Blois, and Lain — are well acquainted with all of them and thus notice quickly that they all seem terrified of something.
“Were you able to enjoy your vacation, Sansui?”
Even if he is terrified, there was no way my lord would ever let it show on his features. His Brothership maintains the pretense that everything is normal and greets me with a casual question.
“Yes, I was able to pay my respects to Blois’s parents. I thank you for your consideration in providing me with leave,” I respond, kneeling as I do so. It had been a pretty fun trip, and I really did appreciate having the opportunity to meet with Blois’s family.
As I speak, Blois’s siblings look upon me with a certain amount of envy about the simple chat I’m having with His Brothership. Like their middle sister, I am also a direct subordinate of Lord Sepaeda. While they had naturally known that on an intellectual level, seeing it for themselves must have given it a new sense of reality. The fact that we had been shown into the throne room immediately upon arrival is also kind of absurd, when you stop to think about it.
However, this isn’t the time to worry about Blois’s siblings.
“No doubt you’ve already noticed, but…”

“Yes. I felt the presence of both ki and Vajra’s power in the storm clouds covering the kingdom, and thus I surmised that it was caused by an acquaintance of my master.”
“That’s right. Your master’s brother apprentice sought to kill him, first attacking the Domino Republic before setting foot in our kingdom. Saiga, Shouzo, Tahlan, and Ran intercepted him under Lord Ukyou’s command, but… In the end, it was your master, Suiboku, who defeated the intruder.”
It goes without saying that I hadn’t known those details. I was able to tell that Master Suiboku and his acquaintance were fighting, even from afar, but I had no way of knowing that any others had been involved in the fight. Even though three aces that His Majesty and the Four Lords put their faith in had been deployed, they had still been unable to win. And if Ran and Tahlan had been part of that force as well, just how great were the heights of power that Master Suiboku’s brother apprentice had achieved?
I could say without a doubt that, even if I had been here, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything about him. Yet, in spite of that, the intruder probably wasn’t even able to scratch my master.
“Practically speaking, there was no actual damage. The sun disappeared for several days, but the bright days since have made up for that. While there will likely be some impact on this year’s harvest, it’s not bad enough that we can’t handle it. Considering that the enemy was an Immortal, one who was over four thousand years old, we got off remarkably lightly.”
Considering that my master had destroyed several countries in the past, getting away with just losing a few crops can definitely be considered a win.
“But, aside from that… Well, that is. Ahem. Go and have a chat with your master.”
“Very well. Thank you, Your Lordship.”
Now, it was my turn to talk to the man that had the five great men here cowering.
“It’s been a while, Master. I didn’t think I would see you again so soon,” I say, greeting my master. He, of course, is standing calmly in a corner of the room.
It was only after I spoke to him that Lain, Blois, and Blois’s siblings realized that my master was here at all. Like me, my master doesn’t have much in the way of a presence. While he does exude an aura, it’s so in tune with nature that if he’s standing still it’s difficult to notice that he’s there at all.
“Yes, indeed. While I’m happy to see you again, you also have my apologies. Especially as it seems I caused problems for your employer.”
Lyra, Hetter, and — more than anyone — Chette all look astonished at the sight of my master. While they had probably expected something unusual, Master Suiboku still appears to be younger than me.
“It was all my fault. You need not forgive me.”
My master appears truly penitent — no doubt this has all been extremely hard on him. But, as Master Suiboku already understands, the person who had suffered the most must have been his brother apprentice. Had it been a

conflict between two Japanese people, the worst possible outcome would have been the victim of bullying training hard to get revenge, only to find that the bully had gotten even stronger than him, and the victim ultimately losing.
“Master Suiboku, this is the Arcana Kingdom. As it’s a country of mortals, let’s leave the judgment to His Majesty the King. I will simply adhere to his decision.”
“Yes, you’re right... I truly have caused everyone so many problems. That’s true of my friend — my brother apprentice — and true of you, my own apprentice. If there’s anything I can do as penance, I intend to do it. Still, if you intend to take my head, I would like a bit of time before the sentence is carried out.”
As someone from Japan, my personal belief is that if someone strong enough to casually destroy the world comes offering his head as penance, it’s way too daunting to actually take them up on that offer. I’m pretty sure that the people of the Arcana Kingdom feel the same way.
“But I suppose they wouldn’t want the head of this old geezer. It wouldn’t fetch a single copper.”
“Then do you have a proposal?”
“Yes. While I haven’t taught them to you, I have a number of techniques that can create various items that have value in the mortal world. I intend to offer up those items.”
“You can do such things?”
I hadn’t actually expected that anything like the object of Chette’s fervent hopes actually existed.
“They weren’t necessary for you, since you wanted to be the strongest, and I never felt the need to make them for myself.”
As for the reason he hadn’t made any, it’s exactly as I expected. It made sense that, if they’re items that normal people would want, he never felt the need to make them even though he could.
“And as with other Immortal Arts, it takes time both to learn the techniques and to prepare the item. However, that isn’t an issue this time.”
Then, my master unwraps the linen parcel he had placed on the floor. Immediately after, a rich, sweet scent spreads through the room. The aroma of the room changes so rapidly and so thoroughly that it’s hard to believe that Master Suiboku had just opened a cloth bundle. Everyone in the room who had been frightened of my master is drawn to the objects that my master sets out.
While I don’t feel any hunger, the scent is almost enough to make my mouth water. At the very least, I know it’s something delicious.
“When I was wandering, I still had much to learn, so I relied upon these quite a bit. They are the Coiled Peach and the Divine Ginseng, considered the ultimate mortal panaceas.”
They’re fruits: one is a peach, while the other is an odd shape that resembles a human child.

“The Coiled Peach refreshes the body’s blood and its power, removing all fatigue. As for the Divine Ginseng, it can regrow lost limbs and repair lost eyes and noses.”
I only recall this vaguely, but if I remember correctly, the Mystic Arts can’t regrow lost limbs or even restore lost sight. The only person I know who can regrow lost limbs or torn eyes is Ran the Berserker, and even she can only regrow her own body parts. For a normal person, losing a limb or eye is the end of their functionality.
While the Coiled Peach’s effects might seem humble in contrast to the Divine Ginseng, it is still remarkable. Up until this point, I had never heard of an item that could recover mana or ki.
“Both are extremely potent, so eating them in excess can kill a mortal, but they’re not so powerful that they need to be taken in careful doses. I don’t see anyone who needs the Divine Ginseng here, but I’ll cut up the Coiled Peach and we can each have a slice.”
With that, my master begins to cut up the Coiled Peach using a borrowed knife and cutting board. As he cuts into the mystical fruit, its aroma grows more intense, and everyone in the room can’t help but stare intently at my master.
“There, enjoy!”
A server picks up the slices of the fruit that my master had prepared and carries them over to the others. While the server appears tempted to take a slice, his sense of professionalism keeps him from doing something so uncouth. Ordinarily, there’s no way that people of high rank would ever eat an unknown fruit without having a taster check for poison first. Moreover, given that my master, who had brought and offered the fruit, had noted that eating too much of it would kill you, so it’s hard to imagine anyone wanting to eat it at all.
But, well, this is my master who’s offering it, the man who had levitated a giant forest and parked it high above the Royal Capital. It would actually be more surprising if he took the trouble to use poison here to kill people, since it would be much easier for him to simply beat the offending party to death. In that sense, rejecting a gift from my master is something that takes a certain amount of courage. After all, he might be offended at having his gift rejected.
Putting all of that aside, the Coiled Peach had filled the room with a mouth-watering scent, one so strong that I think people would eat it even if they understood that it could kill them if they ate too much. Everyone present can’t resist the aroma, and so they each quietly bring a slice to their lips, wordlessly chewing and swallowing.
Now, I suppose I should eat it too. My master had prepared a slice for the server, after all, so it’d be disrespectful if I didn’t eat it myself.
“Mm.”
Since I don’t get hungry, eating isn’t an enjoyable act. I’ve long since forgotten the pleasures associated with eating something tasty and feeling

sated afterward; at the same time, I've also forgotten the suffering associated with hunger. I can never quite decide whether the tradeoff is worth it. Thinking upon that, I can't help but feel a trace of sadness.
However, even I can feel the effects of the Coiled Peach. A powerful burst of ki spreads all through my body after I swallow the slice. At the same time, everyone else's bodies begin practically overflowing with vital energy.
When I cast glances around the room, everyone is silently basking in the warm glow of happiness. To be so fulfilled after eating a single slice must mean that it's just that delicious. As for myself, I can't enjoy that flavor. I feel like I'm missing out, like I'm being excluded, because I can't share in that sense of happiness.
"My…"
Chette, who had been basking in the afterglow of eating her slice, finally notices the physical effects of the Coiled Peach. She touches her skin and marveled at its firmness. As she had hoped, her body has regained its suppleness.
That's also true of everyone else; regardless of gender, everyone's skin is glowing. Of course, the glow is just the surface effect. Beneath the skin, everything from internal organs to blood vessels had been rejuvenated and restored to mint condition.
Now, this is also true of my body and of my master's, showing that the Coiled Peach is truly an amazing fruit. The fact that it can help a mortal, even temporarily, achieve a physical state approaching that of an Immortal who had spent countless years obtaining that health, is nothing short of remarkable.
"My, my, my!"
Chette, who had gotten the effects that she hoped for — no, beyond what she had hoped for — looks positively giddy with excitement. Of course, that doesn't much distinguish her from the others, every one of whom is in a similar state. However, considering the rarefied company she's in, it's still plenty embarrassing.
Still, everyone is slowly regaining their senses. They should feel re-energized, both physically and mentally, without fatigue or listlessness. As the reality of that effect sinks in, some of them even feel a prickle of fear about what they'd experienced.
Having regained their composure, the mortals once again look upon my master.
"Indeed, this is a remarkable fruit…"
His Majesty the King, representing everyone in the room, stated his honest opinion with a voice filled with reverential awe. Now that they had directly experienced the effects of the Coiled Peach, there's no reason for them to doubt the ability of the Divine Ginseng to regrow limbs. Given that, this represents a tangible and surprising way for them to truly come to understand that my master and I are actually immortal.

“They’re certainly the items that are most appreciated by mortals out of all the things I can create. There were quite a few who sought these things in the past.”
My master seems reassured and pleased that his penitential gifts had been well-received. Just as my master had noted, they do seem like items that many people would want to obtain. Looking at just how happy Chette appears to be, I imagine that they would be particularly sought after by women.
“No doubt…” His Majesty says, agreeing with my master’s sentiment. While His Majesty is still too young to be considered elderly, he is certainly at an age where he can feel his own physical decline.
“Indeed. A long time ago, when I was creating Coiled Peaches deep in a secluded mountain, a queen who claimed the mountains as part of her lands sent a messenger to me. She had mistaken the Coiled Peach for an elixir of eternal life and demanded that I hand it over. Since I was the one who had intruded upon her domain, and I had a few in my possession at the time, I gave about half of them over to her. They had the effect that the queen had hoped for, but evidently she’d gotten the wrong idea in her head, and later demanded that I hand over the rest. I couldn’t very well give her all of my Coiled Peaches, and I’d already told her that it took several years to make them, but she didn’t believe me…”
Oh, I see. So the Coiled Peaches’ efficacy had caused him that sort of problem in the past.
“In the end, I ended up destroying that country. I suppose women are as obsessed with beauty as men are with strength.”
The problem had been more serious than I thought. His Majesty is also struck dumb, as it had clearly been a far more serious matter than he had first imagined.
“Well, of course, it wasn’t just queens who wanted the Coiled Peaches. Plenty of male kings demanded them, as well. Often, they’d want them to feed to their wives and daughters, in addition to themselves. In the end, they tried to restrain me because the peaches were so effective and, alas, it always ended the same way.”
While Master Suiboku is so casual about the events that he makes it sound like they had happened to someone else, that’s probably not why he’s so matter-of-fact about it. He probably thought that, since the countries had attacked him first, he had been fully justified in destroying them. I don’t particularly disagree with that stance.
“Nothing in this world is eternal. If anyone is concerned about their beauty or their skin, then they should stop drinking spirits, eat grains and fruits, and get enough sleep. Really work at it.”
You can maintain your health through a balanced diet and appropriate amounts of exercise. Of course, just stating the obvious doesn’t actually work in human society.

“Then again, if I were to start on that, then I suppose it’s better to not fight with a blade than it is to learn a technique to heal a sword wound. No doubt it all sounds like hollow hypocrisy coming from a battle junkie such as myself,” my master says in a jocular tone, but no one else in the room could quite bring themselves to laugh.
“I see… I now understand at least partly why you’re said to have destroyed countless countries.”
His Majesty’s understanding seems to be accompanied by a healthy dose of fear. I doubt my master had ever or would ever go out of his way to destroy a country. At least, that’s my impression on the subject.
One of the reasons that he had often ended up destroying countries was because he had learned extremely useful Immortal Arts techniques. Such desire had been present in the queen who had demanded all of my master’s Coiled Peaches, and based on how Chette had acted recently, no doubt a fair number of women at any point in history would lust after the secret of my master’s youth.
It was precisely because he could create things that had the desired effect that my master had received requests and demands from all sorts, which then became the all-encompassing need to possess him, a tendency that no doubt grew stronger as one went up the social totem pole. At the very least, people like the émigré nobles from the Domino Empire would probably have come to similar conclusions.
But in my master’s case, he’s strong enough to actually fight back and defeat an entire country if it tries to constrain him. If the ruler of a country mobilizes his entire army to try to secure my master, my master has enough strength to massacre the entire force. That was why all those countries ended up destroyed in the end. Of course, that’s probably not all of it.
Still, I doubt that would occur with this King of Arcana, because he had learned of my master’s absurd power before he had discovered how useful my master could be.
“Still, I would rather not have you fear me so much. I have no intention of destroying this country. This isn’t any attempt to curry favor, simply an item offered in apology, so please accept it.”
More than anything, my master feels a certain, entirely justified level of guilt toward the Arcana Kingdom. Since my master generally acts without weighing the costs and benefits beforehand, unless the king demands that my master declare eternal fealty and serve the kingdom forever, no doubt he’ll accede to most requests.
While a queen in the distant past had evidently angered him by demanding all of the Coiled Peaches he had created, in this particular instance, my master had created the Coiled Peaches with the intention of giving them all to the Arcana Kingdom.
“Oh, that reminds me.”
As I mull these things over, my master turns to look at me. Or rather, he’s looking at Blois and me.

“This is something that I should be ashamed of as an Immortal. I forgot to mention something.”
I wonder what it is that he had forgotten.
“Sansui.”
“Yes?”
“You don’t have any sexual desire, do you?”
Just why does he need to bring this up in front of everyone? I mean, he and I might have set aside our physical desires, but I’d at least hoped he had retained some sense of decorum.
“I don’t, no.”
Still, there’s no point in lying about it, so I decide to answer him honestly.
For her part, Blois looked extremely embarrassed. Considering that we’re in front of really important people, as well as her siblings, I really wish my master hadn’t brought this particular subject up at this particular moment.
“Yes, it’s true that an Immortal who has trained for a long time loses his physical desires. However, there’s a technique to restore them.”
“…Huh?”
Blois looks shocked at the revelation. I, too, am extremely surprised.
“Or rather, without using this technique, an Immortal can’t have children.”
“Wha?”
Hearing my master’s explanation, Blois lets out a demoralized whimper.
Wait, so does that mean… So, just what had been the point of all our struggles, embarrassment, and effort…?
“The technique is called the Golden Balm, and it allows you to manipulate your physical age… But… Well, it’s been a long time since I’ve had reason to think about *that* side effect…”
It wasn’t surprising that my master had forgotten about a technique that could restore his libido, considering that he’d spent centuries training by himself in the middle of a forest. Or rather, it would have been kind of sad if the young Master Suiboku had as strong a libido as he had a drive to fight, and had been constantly chasing after women, so perhaps it’s better this way.
“Now, an Immortal is one who draws in the ki of nature into themselves. As such, manipulating one’s body is also part of the Immortal Arts.”
Master Suiboku begins gathering his ki around his belly, and his body starts to change. My master, who had previously appeared as a child not much older than Lain, quickly becomes clearly taller than I am. Not only is he now bigger than me, but he also looks older.
“As you see, the Golden Balm technique allows you control over your body. This time, I created it within my body, but I can also manifest it externally to form a pill for you to take. Now, bear in mind that if a mortal consumes this, it’ll act as a deadly poison, giving them a temporary surge of energy before killing them. Do be careful with it.”
“Oh, thank you.”

I took a small, round pill from the now grown-up Master Suiboku. To think the day when I would look up at my master had finally come. You really can never tell what will happen in this world.
This Golden Balm medicine didn't look particularly strange to the naked eye, but it contained enormous amounts of ki from my master, just like the Coiled Peach and Divine Ginseng.
"So... If he takes this, Papa will get big as well?" Lain says, looking expectantly at my now-adult master.
"Indeed, it'll work the exact same way," My master says, smirking with his grown-up features. True, he had proven the technique's effects.
"So... If he takes this, will Sansui view me as a woman?" Like Lain, Blois is looking expectantly at my master, who is now taller than she is.
"Well, I can't guarantee that," my master says in the pitiless tones of an adult. "Or, rather, isn't it up to you to make that happen, in the end?"
"Y-Yes, you're right!" Blois answers with conviction, albeit after first shrinking back a little.
So this is what it looks like when my master gives romantic advice to a woman. That's another surprise, really.
"Now..."
As I'm about to take the medicine, Blois and Lain begin looking at me expectantly. It's a little difficult to actually swallow the pill when they're staring so intently at me. I mean, sure, this will make me an adult, but growing up isn't always all that it's cracked up to be...
I glance around the room and can't help but I notice that everyone else is also looking on with intense curiosity.
"Very well."
Since I don't have the option of not taking it, I swallow the medicine. I don't bother savoring it or anything, and the moment I swallow it, my body absorbs it completely. The enormous power that had been contained within spreads out rapidly and thoroughly. I can feel a warmth rushing through my body, awakening things that had long been dormant.
This is pretty similar to the effect that Tainted Blood has on the body, incidentally.
"Mmm..."
"So, how is it?"
"Yes, this would definitely kill anyone other than an Immortal if they took it..."
I can feel the ki, the power of nature, course through my veins. I can observe every part of my body, even as I work to contain the powerful energy from harming me.
At this point, my body begins to grow, just as my master's had. Not only do my limbs grow longer, but my muscles thicken. I don't end up particularly tall, just enough to be on the upper end of normal. As I glance around afterward, I can see the world in a different way, as my perspective has

shifted noticeably upward. Moreover, even as I look out differently, others look at me with new expressions.
“Um… Master, it seems like my voice has changed too.”
“Yes, it has.”
“The sudden growth makes me feel odd — restless, even. How long will this last?”
“It should wear off by tomorrow morning or so.”
I’m not short as my master, so I’m not particularly dissatisfied with my height. In that sense, becoming taller isn’t something that makes me particularly happy. However, I can feel the heat radiating from the gazes that Blois and Lain are sending my way. Both of them look really happy as they stare up at me.

Yes, I am now taller than Blois.
“So, this is the real Sansui…”
“So, this is the real Papa…”
Blois and Lain look overjoyed as they witness my temporary, drug-induced growth. That is, a false physique I’d gained from doping. Honestly, having them look so enamored at this false, temporary body of mine is something of a blow to my confidence.
“Sansui! What do you feel when you look at me?” Blois asks enthusiastically, evidently forgetting about everyone around us.
Until a few moments ago, I had naturally considered Blois to be beautiful, but it was the sort of appreciation for beauty that one felt when looking at a wildflower. Now, though, I can feel my heart beat faster in a way it hasn’t for a long, long time.
“Wow…”
I feel a pang of nostalgia, even as I struggle to process the changes that had happened inside of me.
I remember this. This feeling is…
“Blois, you might yell at me for saying this, but…”
“W-What is it?”
It seems Blois is hoping for me to say something as she gazes up at me. She’s in no state of mind to register my preface that she might get mad about my forthcoming frank observation.
“I’m really…”
“You’re really…what?”
“Really hungry.”
An unbelievably loud grumble echoes out from my stomach, clearly signaling to the world that it’s starving. Yes, this pang is unmistakably a pang of hunger. I have now regained my sense of hunger for the first time in five hundred years.
“Err?”
It isn’t that I don’t feel any desire for Blois. I do. It’s just that I’m so close to starvation that I can’t focus on anything else.
“This is the first time I’ve ever seen Sansui seem so weak,” His Brothership murmurs beneath the sound of my rumbling stomach.
In fact, I’m so hungry that I feel faint. Having my physical desires back apparently means that I also feel hunger and thirst. This is evidently the price I have to pay.
“Sansui…”
“Papa…”
Although I feel bad about disappointing them, I’m so hungry that I can’t even make a gesture to that effect.
“Mm… You still need more training.”
“My apologies…”
Evidently, it is possible to avoid feeling starved after using the Golden Balm. I guess I’ll need to be careful to make sure this doesn’t happen again.

“Well, it’s worth experiencing things not going as expected when you first try them. If you’re not used to your grown limbs, you can very well be caught off guard from the slightest of slips.”
My master’s face, the one that I had been looking up at earlier, is now at around the same height as my own.
“Once you’ve eaten, come see me. It’s time that I give you more instruction.”

Part 15 — Enlightenment

Not everyone in the palace is a noble or royal. There are, of course, people of various different social classes, and as a result there are also several mess halls, each catering to a different social class.
As for us, we’re having lunch at one of the eating areas that sits squarely in the middle of the hierarchy of palace mess halls. While we had eaten several times as a family on our vacation, I hadn’t really enjoyed those meals, as I had no sense of hunger at the time. So, in a sense, this is perhaps my first proper meal since coming to this world.
“Phew… I’m quite full…”
Just because it was my first meal in five hundred years didn’t mean I was going to eat five hundred years worth of food. I ate an average amount of food for a grown man, and was sated afterward.
“…Wow. It’s like Sansui is an ordinary man.”
“Yeah… Papa’s normal.”
Blois and Lain are both really surprised just by the fact that I ate something. No, it wasn’t just surprise; they’re actually moved by the sight. I suppose it’s true that there’s something a little creepy about having a husband or a father who never eats anything. After all, when I was like that, I couldn’t share in their feelings or experiences, after all.
Still, this experience had made me realize all the more that I was an Immortal. After all, I had completely forgotten one of the most basic needs of any living thing up until just a little while ago.
“So… Blois. Not to bring up the subject from earlier, but, what do you think of me now?”
“You’re really handsome!”
“Yes! Papa’s handsome!”
I don’t feel even an iota of pleasure from having this facade praised by them. Could it be that the two of them actually hate me? I mean, I would prefer that they look at who I really am. Still, it isn’t that I don’t understand their complaints. That’s what makes this difficult for me. I mean, in my case, if Blois was going to remain a little child forever, or if Lain had stayed a baby indefinitely, while I wouldn’t hate them, I’d still have my problems with that situation.
Even though both of them don’t despise my natural state, they do have their complaints. Or rather, even without putting too much thought into it, it

would be even more problematic if they completely loved how I had looked up to this point.
“I see…”
So we’ve ended up solving a problem that I originally had no intention of solving. I mean, I don’t care about my own appearance, and if anything I’m pretty hurt at how much the two of them like how I look right now, but I suppose it’s a good thing that the two of them are happy.
Oh, right, speaking of solving problems…there’s also the issue of Chette.
“Ahh… Look, Hetter, Blois, Lyra… Isn’t my skin lovely?”
Having obtained the effect that she had longed for, Chette now basks in the suppleness of her skin, not even thinking to touch her meal. She had come to this land looking for a faint sliver of hope, and she had, through sheer luck, obtained it. It’s very much like a miracle, and one she hadn’t even had to work for.
“Big Sis… Could you stop? It’s embarrassing.”
“Big Sister, you should know that we all have the same effect.”
Chette is an adult woman who has opted to indulge in a smug sense of superiority by continually stroking her own skin in public. Since she is their older sister, it’s understandable why Lyra and Hetter are so embarrassed by her behavior.
“Oh, that’s…true.”
Just as Lyra had noted, all six of us had eaten the Coiled Peach. Obviously the young girls like Lyra and Lain have beautiful, supple skin, but now that is even true of Hetter, as well.
“…”
Chette looks crestfallen, as though she has been woken from a dream. Her lips pout into a moue of disappointment and she stops stroking her cheeks. Evidently it just isn’t as fun when there’s no envy involved. I understand why she feels that way, and it is absolutely an improvement over how depressed she was a few days ago. But, wow, she is making no effort to hide how satisfied she is.
“You really can be a bother sometimes, Big Sister. I know my nephew and niece, and even your husband, have all been struggling to deal with you.”
“…”
It seems that Lyra’s obvious critique makes her feel uncomfortable, and so Chette turns away with a pout. Lyra is right: Chette really is being awfully selfish.
“Anyway… I still find it hard to believe. I really was in the presence of His Majesty and the lords of the Four Great Houses just a short while ago,” Hetter says, trying to change the subject. We all hop onto this new topic eagerly.
“It made me realize my own limitations. Just being in that room felt oppressive to me. You’ve always been in places like that, right, Blois? Didn’t you find it suffocating?”

“Yes, that’s right, Big Brother. Unlike Sansui, I also had to attend society events, so I had to put in quite a lot of work to avoid doing or saying anything that could be construed as an offense.”
“Mmhm… There’s nothing to envy about that. I really am sorry.”
Blois had been the daughter of a mere vassal of House Sepaeda in rooms filled with the most influential people in the Arcana Kingdom. Those were environments that had been rife with constant stress, and Blois hadn’t had any emotional bandwidth to actually enjoy those opportunities. All she was able to do in those situations was to reduce her presence to a bare minimum and hope that nothing happened. It was much the same for Hetter. While he had certainly aspired to move in those circles, when he had actually been among them, there had been nothing remotely enjoyable about the experience.
“I see we put a lot on your shoulders…” Hetter mused. At long last, Hetter finally seems to understand what Blois had dealt with all those years, and thus apologizes to her. It had taken some time, but Hetter has finally realized that there had been nothing enviable about Blois’s position.
“Big Brother…”
Blois seems extremely happy to be able to commiserate with her brother. It is true that people are most content when they find common bonds and shared experiences between each other.
“Say, Papa, it seemed like Master Suiboku had prepared some other things, too, didn’t it?”
“Yeah. To learn that Master Suiboku had mastered so many other things… Even as his apprentice, it came as a bit of a shock.”
Everyone present had read the mood and refrained from mentioning a certain topic: that even the rulers of the Arcana Kingdom had been afraid of my master. They were all very skillful and dedicated, and there were many parts of them that were worthy of admiration. That is exactly why they had felt fear in my master’s presence.
Still, ultimately, that’s all to the good. If Master Suiboku couldn’t conjure up that kind of fear, I don’t know how he would have made things right with the Arcana Kingdom. They could have asked him to destroy all of their neighboring countries and, well, he could have done it. It’s easy enough with the power to manipulate both heaven and earth.
Even if they wouldn’t make him go to that particular extreme, he might very well have accepted a request to serve as the force that allowed the kingdom to rule over those neighboring countries. Compared to that, offering fruit with medical properties that important personages would seek out is an extremely peaceful solution.
“You know, Papa, you really do look great!”
I feel exposed by the gazes from my wife and daughter. Then again, I suppose most wives and daughters would prefer an ordinary father to having the world’s greatest swordsman.

“Yeah. It would have been even better had he given us the Golden Balm when we went to visit him a while back…” Blois says happily, noting her disappointment. On that front, I’m sure my master feels the same way. I mean, he had even apologized for it.
“This means we can make a sister or brother for Lain!”
“…”
Hearing that, I felt my cheeks redden.
“Papa!”
“Sansui!”
Both Lain and Blois look extremely pleased at the sight of me blushing. Seeing them so happy over such a little thing makes me wonder just how much I’d made them deal with up to this point. Why else are they so happy to see me look embarrassed?
“Glad to see you’re getting along well, Blois.”
“Thank you, Big Sister.”
Still, it probably isn’t a bad thing. Chette seems happy about me having regained my libido, and her standards as a married woman are probably higher than anyone’s. The relationships between families, rather than between individuals, carry a particular weight in this world. That is particularly true for me because I’m the one who is outside the norm, and ordinarily I would have a family and the inherited responsibilities that come with them.
“Anyway, Master Sansui.”
“Yes?”
“A medicine that can make people other than Immortals younger… Surely that exists, yes?”
I suppose there’s no such thing as a limit to human desire. Well, there might be no limit, but it would be better for everyone if there was one. Chette has already convinced herself that there is a way for her to get younger, and her face is lit up in a bright, presumptuous smile.
“It really would have been better if there was no way to get younger.”
As Lyra noted in a murmur, Chette really seems to have no limit to her ambitions. Even if I was able to actually make her younger, I’m sure she’d probably come up with even more demanding requests. She’d probably ask to make her taller or shorter, or increase or reduce the amount of fat on various parts of her body. Compared to that sort of selfish desire, perhaps the things Blois and Lain want from me are rather humble and restrained.
“W-Well anyway, it was a superb item, wasn’t it! It would be nice if our family could be involved in some way, but…” Hetter says, praising the Coiled Peach as a means of changing the subject.
“Ahaha! Big Brother, do you really think we could actually hope for something like that? Silly Big Brother, of course we couldn’t! There’s no way that the king and the other Great Lords wouldn’t just keep them under their direct control!”
“Hahaha! You’re completely right!”

Even as Lyra completely shuts down his proposal, Hetter is still able to laugh it off. It looked to me like a little interplay carried out by two people who could only know each other like siblings could.
“If possible, could I ask for it just for myself?”
The oldest sister completely ignores that exchange, of course, despite being the one probably most in need of restraint.
“A-At any rate, I think I’ll head over to see my master. I’d like to get used to this body, after all…”
“Oh, then please put in a good word for me.”
The fact that Chette is going to be my sister-in-law is, at this late hour, just now starting to weigh on me. Surely she shouldn’t be so desirous of simply having such miracles handed to her.
There is a courtyard in the palace that was carpeted in grass and otherwise decorated with flowers and trees. It is probably a part of the palace that is usually used as a place of relaxation for the royals or the people close to them in status. My master waits for me there, unaccompanied by any guards or gardeners.
“Sansui.”
“Master.”
Even in his adult form, my master is the same as he’s always been. There was no chance that I’d ever miss noticing him, and I am immediately able to find him in the courtyard.
“…You’ve grown into quite the swordsman.”
He compliments me, but he’s not talking about my physical growth. This physical growth was a consequence of my master’s Immortal Art, and I had done nothing to achieve it. What my master is happily praising is, without a doubt, my growth as both a master of the sword and as a person.
“I was able to observe your apprentices fighting my friend. Both Saiga and Tahlan are wonderful swordsmen.”
Tahlan and Saiga had visited my master in the past, so he has been able to see them on multiple occasions. Having done so, he applauds my instruction and the fact that they have both grown stronger and more skilled under my tutelage.
“The Marked also fought properly, without being consumed by her passions.”
“I haven’t taught Ran anything.”
“Don’t be so harsh with her. She was doing her best in that battle,” my master says, chuckling as he recalls recent events.
“…You saved me. You, and those you’ve taught.”
I see my master age before my eyes as he expresses an elderly man’s contentment with his life.
“I’ve committed far too many sins in my lifetime. Then, having abandoned the world without telling anyone, I ended up killing my own brother, who had done so much for me.”

He has his regrets and his disappointments, undoubtedly. But, at the same time, there is a certain kind of contentment in his expression.
“I’m sure you felt it as well. The hatred that my brother had poured into those storm clouds.”
“Yes. It felt like he was suffering from an emotional illness.”
“It’s all my fault.”
I’m sure. I can actually say that without the faintest amount of doubt. Even having only met the Sacred Treasures once, I could tell that they still hated my master passionately, even after not seeing him for over a thousand years. Given that, I don’t even want to imagine just how much someone who had trained with my master had hated him.
No, I can’t say that. I had actually felt that hatred, an awesomely huge grudge that made its way into the gathered clouds. It was an animus so great that it felt like it could envelop the entire world.
“I have done nothing but spread misery all over the world. When I finally realized that, I couldn’t think of anything else but to retreat into the woods.”
Having accepted that he had been mistaken, my master had chosen to isolate himself from the rest of the world. Perhaps he had already subconsciously chosen to go into permanent self-exile when he retreated into the woods to train.
“I’m not a man who should be out in the mortal world. I’m a berserker, one capable of even less restraint than a Marked. My friend had constantly tried to convey that to me over three thousand years ago, and yet… I looked down upon him for being weaker than me, I mocked him, and I regarded his words as the bitter recriminations of a loser…”
My master clearly feels an immense amount of regret.
“Had I only noticed earlier… Had I just accepted what my friend had pointed out before I entered the world… At the very least, I wouldn’t have spread so much misery.”
It’s true, it would have been better if he’d come to that conclusion before pursuing the path of the sword. However, the answer that my master had sought had already been right there within his grasp since his days as a mere apprentice. The atrocities that my master had committed had benefited no one in the end, not even himself.
“But that sinful man was saved. Sansui, you’re my ideal.”
I am thus to receive the fruits of his pursuit.
“I pressed my ideals upon you, Sansui. I still feel guilty about that. I forced you to spend days, years, decades doing something where you couldn’t notice — you couldn’t ever see — the fruits of your efforts. Centuries where you couldn’t ever feel the sense of accomplishment that came with growth. I forced those uninteresting days upon you…”
“…But that ended up being the right thing to do. Or so I believe.”
Even if my training had been boring, uninteresting, and nothing more than the constant accumulation of effort… Even then, that is my suffering and

mine alone. No one else had ever suffered because of my training. No matter how stifling it had been for me, I hadn't caused any worldly upheavals. Now that I know about all of the unnecessary pain that he had caused, I can understand why my master had chosen to train me as he did.
"Even if my teachings were ultimately correct, they wouldn't have meant anything if you hadn't chosen to behave correctly. Sansui, you were the one who did that."
My master had also had a master of his own, but did not blame his master for his mistakes, saying that the responsibility rested solely with himself. Under the same logic, he had to give me credit for my own accomplishments.
"…I was blessed in terms of talent, in my master, in my friend, in my blade, and in my apprentice."
Master Suiboku reaches for the wooden sword on his hip, and having seen him do so, I do the same.
"Sansui… Being your master is what I am most proud of in this world. You endured my training, you absorbed my teachings, and you made them all into your own."
We slowly, ever so slowly, draw our wooden swords.
"Allow me to give you some additional instruction."
We point our wooden swords at one another in a middle stance.
"That reminds me. Sansui."
"Yes."
"Thinking about it, this is the first time we've squared off like this, isn't it?"
We face off in the quiet courtyard. For the first time in my life, I am opposite an opponent I know to be stronger than me. Swords are about to clash in the courtyard ordinarily meant for quiet relaxation.
"Now, shall we begin?"
"Yes. Thank you for the opportunity."
I mentally go over my current physical abilities, all of which have been reinforced by the Golden Balm. It is something that I really need to do, and as quickly as possible. This practice duel is partly for that purpose.
"…"
I had already been well aware of this, but my master is far superior to me, even in his skills with the blade. Just facing off against him, I quickly come to understand that gap in skill. Unlike all of the opponents I have fought to date, I don't feel like I can hit him, no matter what I try. This is probably what people who fought my master and I feel. As I think about that, I felt a little guilty about all my old opponents. However, that isn't a reason not to test my blade against my master.
I make the first move, taking the initiative against my master. I draw back with my sword and bring it down in a swing. I don't do anything like leap toward him, and simply step in along with the swing.
"Mm."

As my master blocks my blow, he sees that my swing is messy, and I can't help but notice that I'm not able to wield my grown body properly. It is only natural, since the body that hadn't changed for five hundred years is suddenly different in multiple ways. That is why there's no reason to be surprised, and simply consider my new awkwardness an issue I need to work on and solve through practice.
"Hrmph…"
"Mm."
I make corrections as I swing my wooden sword, but my master still blocks the blows, stepping backward as he does. Despite the fact that he could have simply avoided the blow, or even chosen to deflect it, he chooses instead to block it directly, using his own strength. This is likely because this is simply a practice duel, nothing more than a test drive for my new body.
I feel a warmth in my chest at my master's considerate kindness. As I have been serving as an instructor, even with my limitations, it is a fresh experience for me to receive such instruction in turn. In all honesty, it's really fun, and I'm quite happy about it.
"Sansui, when I was young, all I sought was victory. Do you know why?"
I flex my muscles, intending to force my way through his defense, leaning my body weight into the blow. My master simply continues to receive my blows with straightforward blocks.
"Because you wanted to win against any opponent, right?"
We exchange words as we exchange sword strokes. That sort of thing isn't particularly out of the ordinary for me or my master.
"That's exactly right."
At around the limit of his parry, my master tilts his wooden blade and deflects my own. Because I had been putting my body weight behind my sword, I wobbled forward as he did so.
"I was so immature that I feared losing and sought only absolute victories."
Having broken down my balance, my master then slashes at me in turn. Determining that I won't be able to block in time with my wooden sword, I follow through on my swing and close the distance with him. I move in further, beyond the inner effective range of his sword, and press with my body.
"The fact that my heart sought victory was proof of my weakness."
I am currently set up against my master's body. Neither of us can swing our wooden swords, nor can we land any unarmed blows, effectively locking us in a clench. In terms of the ideal response, I should probably let go of my wooden sword and grapple with him. That wouldn't be the wrong move to make.
But this is, after all, a practice duel. My master and I both back off and open the distance. We regroup, taking a moment, and then return to sword range.

“I used to believe that skill with the blade existed to kill my opponent. Why do you think that is?”
We both drop into new stances, completely starting our exchange over.
“Because you didn’t want to think of it as a failure when you killed an opponent you didn’t want to kill.”
The tips of our wooden swords overlap and we use that to gauge our effective range. As I recheck the length of my arms, I lunge forward with a thrust. My aim is directly ahead, a blow to my master’s solar plexus.
“That’s right. Even as I strove to get stronger, I didn’t want to admit that I could ever be weak.”
My master bends his elbows and turns his wooden sword so that it sits vertically, pushing my wooden sword to the side with his blade and throwing my thrust off course. In so doing, he makes use of leverage; my wooden sword has gotten separated from me, while my master’s blade is close to him. That was why he is able to so easily parry my attack.
“There were many swordsmen that I didn’t want to kill, even though we were engaged in fights to the death. But opponents like those were the most difficult to defeat without killing them.”
My master once again attempts a strike at my fully extended body. Since we’re now further apart from one another, I’m not able to avoid the blow as I had earlier. I draw back the foot I had used to lunge forward, turning my blade sideways to protect my head as I use my strength to block my master’s strike.
No, more precisely, I had been given no choice but to block the blow with brute force. Up until this duel, I had always relied upon my skill when attacking, but because my master is far superior to me with the sword, I’m forced to resort to strength against him.
“I didn’t want to think of killing my opponent as a failure. I had given up, convincing myself that killing even opponents I didn’t want to kill was only natural. I had fooled myself into believing that was simply how it was, a law of nature that I couldn’t change,” my master says. “Even so, killing an opponent that I didn’t want to kill was a sign of complete immaturity.”
I use my wooden sword to block a series of rather rough strikes, stepping back as I parry each blow.
“In the past, I tried many different styles of swordplay. At one time, it was putting down my opponent with a single blow; another time, it was to read what my opponent was doing. Why do you think that is?”
I keep backing up as I am pushed back by my master’s blows, finally hitting my heel on a curbstone on the courtyard’s pathway. Evidently considering that to be the boundary, my master stops his attacks. If he was to push me back further, we would end up treading upon the well-kept garden.
“Because you were afraid of failure.”
Which was why my master stopped, why I stopped.
“Indeed.”

We walk back to our starting position, matching our steps as though dancing.
“I sought a strike that could cut through any defense, to entrap my opponent with feints and maneuvers, precisely because I was afraid I might not kill my opponent if things proceeded differently.”
The clash of blades, without a winner or a loser, continues along with our dialogue. I am completely unable to read where the whole exchange was heading. I wonder what it is that my master is trying to tell me.
“People have doubts. It’s due to the possibility of failure that they fear having to select from more than two choices. No Doubt doesn’t mean only having a single answer. It means to train oneself, to trust oneself, to respond without failure, regardless of the situation.”
Suddenly, my master’s demeanor changes. I am very familiar with the emotion that he is now directing at me. It’s similar to anger, but not quite the same. In fact, it’s exactly like the disappointment that Lady Douve, His Brothership, and His Fathership often direct at me.
“I saw your students fight. Saiga, Tahlan, and Ran.”
“Yes.”
“You’re a very good teacher.”
My master strikes at me again, but this time the swing comes with an Immortal Art.
“Leaden Body.”
He brings the weighted wooden sword down in an overhead swing. I couldn’t block this blow the way I had with his earlier attacks. I abandon my attempt to block it just by grasping the hilt of my blade. Instead, I grip both ends of the wooden sword as though I’m holding a stick, but even then, it isn’t enough. If I take this blow at a distance where my master’s motion provides the greatest impact, there is a strong possibility I won’t be able to maintain my block.
I close the distance to try to reduce the impact, but even then, I’m slowly being crushed under the weight of the blow. My master is trying to push through my defenses not by using his physical strength, but with the weight provided by Leaden Body.
“Against my brother, who should have been much stronger than them, they not only fought at an advantage, but were overwhelming him. They all had the heart of true swordsmen and were supporting one another.”
My master reduces the distance between us as he continues to press down upon me. His wooden sword, already heavy at its tip, becomes even heavier along its length as he pushes against my defense.
“They’re all very talented.”
I am somehow able to respond, but I don’t have any strength to spare. As I desperately try to hold up my own wooden sword, I see my master’s hands gripping the hilt of his blade in front of my eyes. My master then strikes at my face with his knuckles, all while still holding his weapon.

“Of course, they were all far from being in a state of No Doubt. The moment their advantage broke, they showed their lack of training. Not only were they unequal to my friend, they’re undoubtedly not equal to you either.”
I absorb that blow with my forehead. The knuckles of my master’s hands split my forehead and draw blood.
“But soon they’ll be able to reach you. If they stand on their tiptoes and jump, their fingertips will touch the soles of your sandals.”
The angle of my master’s wooden sword changes, and he switches from pressing down upon me to pushing me forward. I use that opening to stand and lock our blades together. This situation is at least somewhat better than having my master press down on me.
“That’s good. It’s proof that they’re approaching my realm.”
“Indeed. That’s what it means to have a living school of bladecraft.”
Our hands are both occupied and we’re at close range. This stalemate is far from being ideal for me. After all, my master’s weight is still a threat, even if he’s simply pushing me from the front.
“You have fulfilled your role in the mortal world and have achieved my long-held dream of teaching my sword art to others.”
Losing the shoving match between our blades, I’m thrown backward. If he was to strike now, I have no confidence that I could defend against his blow.
“You taught without holding anything back and showed them the right path. But...you’ve neglected yourself in the process.”
I lighten my body with Feather Step and stand atop the cornerstone. Having seen me do this, my master places his wooden sword back on to his hip. My master had shown me what he wanted me to see: Leaden Body, the counterpart to Feather Step. Just by using a technique that I have yet to learn, he has easily defeated me.
“You’re their master in the art of the sword. Simply teaching them isn’t enough.”
The blood from my split forehead trickles down my face and reaches my lips.
“Your task as their master is to teach your apprentices, give them a path to overtake you, but then strengthen yourself so that they can’t.”
While my master has put away his wooden sword, I, the defeated, still have my sword in hand. Yes, I’d lost. I had lost.
“My ideal is that those who want to pursue the way of the sword can help improve one another. Just providing for them doesn’t result in that symbiosis.”
“I...have I been neglecting my own training?”
I have always noted that I am inferior to my master. It’s because I know that I can’t ever reach my master’s level of skill, no matter who I defeat, no matter how much skill I know myself to have with the blade. But then, maybe that was just an excuse. I know that I was still learning, that I have room to improve, I should have been training myself even as I was training my apprentices.

Even as I kept saying that I still had much to learn, I had simply been maintaining my current position. That was nothing more than a form of laziness, a kind of procrastination that came from taking my current place for granted. I shouldn't have just been working on my swordplay — I should have been learning more Immortal Arts.

"Should I... Should I have gone to seek more instruction from you, Master?"

My master had told me not to return until I had raised Lain. But is that directive really that important? Instead of simply taking apprentices and being happy in seeing their growth, I should have been doing my best to improve, and for that I should have been willing to go to my master to beg for more training.

"Indeed. If you intend to be a goal for your apprentices to aspire to, then first and foremost, you need to continue to better yourself so you don't ever fall behind them. That's the very least that you owe to your apprentices...to the swordsmen who live in the present."

Had I... Had I let myself believe that the moment I live in is simply a detour until I return to my master's side? I had probably considered myself above the mortal world, not giving the present — the now — enough weight. I hadn't given my apprentices, or even Lain or Blois, the weight they deserved.

"Your definition of the most powerful is someone who won't lose to anyone, is it not? Then be stubborn, show envy, and motivate yourself. Don't make excuses. Cling to being the strongest."

I can do nothing but struggle with the realization that I had treated the days up to this point with lazy disregard, caring even more about that than my first defeat or my first wound.

"The way of the sword is fun because we strive with one another. Isn't that so, Master?"

"Indeed it is so, my apprentice."

I have no time to mope. No, I have the responsibility to become even stronger.

Part 16 — Response

I had learned quite a lot from my first practice duel with my master. Not only was I able to get used to how my grown body handles, but he also taught me more about the way of the sword.

Master Suiboku is both an admirable swordsman and an admirable Immortal. I do admit that there's part of me that has my doubts about him as a human being, but as his apprentice, I really do admire him. While I suppose I'm the only person he's ever actually made happy, that's even more reason for me to appreciate what he's done for me.

Besides, people also call me the Grim Reaper and the Gibbeter. In terms of infamy, we're pretty much even.

"There, that should do. Immortal bodies don't retain scars, so it would have been fine just to leave it, but all the same."

My master had stopped my forehead's bleeding and applied a bandage over my wound. I suppose, for an ordinary master-apprentice relationship, I should then reminisce about how my master used to do this for me all the time. Unfortunately, my master hadn't ever done this for me, not once, even during my long history of training with him. Besides, my master had been so quick in taking care of my wound that I didn't really have time to bask in nostalgia.
"Thank you."
"Heh... Sorry to make you listen to an old man's ramblings," Master Suiboku says, smiling happily and looking away a bit shyly. "We're keeping your wife waiting. We should go back."
"Y-Yes, you're right..."
I admit that there's something faintly embarrassing about having my master talk about my wife. This sensation doesn't typically occur, so perhaps this is also a side effect of the Golden Balm. If that's the case, I suppose I'm just in a drug-induced state of heightened emotion. Writing that out makes it sound pretty scary, but thinking about it properly, I'm already an unaging monster to begin with. People really do have a tendency to forget things that they take for granted.
"Why don't you tell me a bit about your experiences while we walk?"
"Sure... There's plenty that I can't talk about, but..."
"Hahaha! Don't concern yourself over such things!"
My master and I could have sped quickly through the palace, if we had wanted to. But since doing so would unnecessarily alarm the royals, we decide to have a leisurely walk back and chat as we go.
Thinking about it, I'm pretty sure this is the first time I've shared a moment like this with my master. I guess my five hundred years of life had been really hollow, if not entirely lacking in substance...
"Well, we can start with how I managed to get hired by my current employer. It was because I jumped over a House Sepaeda carriage while I was carrying Lain."
"Oh? Lucky you weren't killed on the spot."
"It seemed they thought I was in a hurry because I was carrying a baby. They were, in fact, in a bit of a panic, so the truth is that Lain saved my life at that point."
It goes without saying, but there are many soldiers and bureaucrats who serve the royal family in the palace. When they see me, they dismiss me at first, then look back quickly and do a double take. Some of those people can't stop staring as I walk past.
"Mm... Is it because you've grown bigger from the Golden Balm?"
At first I had thought they were afraid of my master and I, but it seems that's not actually the case. Still, it didn't seem like they were surprised that the two of us appear to be full-grown men.
"Master, perhaps it's that they've never seen me injured before."

They’re all looking intently at my face, with a particular focus on my forehead. I suppose it’s only natural that I’ve noticed that they were actually surprised at seeing me injured, since enough people have now stared at my forehead for long enough.
“…That might be it, indeed.”
This is, in reality, the first time I’ve ever gotten hurt. But given that I had faced off against my master, injuries come with the territory. But for the people of the palace, the fact that I’m injured might be quite a shocking thing indeed.
“Mm… So, I’ve made you lose face?”
My master seems a little troubled. Even the Sword Apostle, who had defeated all challengers without taking a scratch, couldn’t defeat his master Suiboku. I suppose that’s the rumor that will spread throughout the palace.
“Hahaha, of course not.”
Honestly, I’ve always felt that my accolades — the Young Sword Apostle, the Arcana Kingdom’s greatest swordsman — are too heavy a burden, and frankly an excessive amount of praise. In truth, I prefer that my reputation is slightly tarnished after this incident. I have no idea how many people I’ve humiliated up until now either. Having done so, it would be rather shameless for me to care about my own reputation.
“This was that I suffered due to my own folly. Please don’t worry about it, Master.”
“Alright. Thank you for saying that.”
“What do you think you’re doing, Sansui?”
While I hadn’t been bothered by it, Lady Douve evidently is. Lady Douve, who had been waiting for me at the estate with Blois and Lain, is quite angry with me over having been injured.
“Mm… Sorry.”
“No, no, please don’t blame yourself, Master Suiboku. It’s all Sansui’s fault for getting hurt in the first place. It’s his fault for being weak.”
Despite her anger, Lady Douve presents an argument that even my master isn’t able to counter. She’s right that I got hurt because I was weak, so she must also be right that it’s my fault for being weak.
“Sansui, the reputation of House Sepaeda rests on your shoulders. What were you thinking? There’s no excuse for simply exposing your wound to all the capital. Even if you were fighting your master, it doesn’t excuse you for leaving it for all to see.”
“Mm…”
“My apologies, Lady Douve.”
Lady Douve, who is extremely irate, glares sharply at me. It seems my getting hurt upset her far more than I anticipated.
“I mean, look. Blois and Lain are both shocked at seeing the wound on your face.”
Lady Douve’s observation is correct. Blois and Lain are indeed both extremely surprised.

“W-What happened, Sansui? Didn’t Master Suiboku only teach you through practice swings?”
“Well, we started a new level today. We did a practice duel with wooden swords… And, well, he landed this blow on me.”
“Why today, of all days?!”
“That’s right, Papa! Mama Blois was so happy that you’d grown up! Why do you come home hurt?!”
“Even if you look like a grown man, I suppose you’re still just a child at heart.”
Lain’s complaints hurt, but so does Lady Douve’s observation. Someone who knows I’ve been alive for five hundred years has pointed out I am still a child in many ways. Does that mean I’m usually treated like a child? I suppose I need to consider my behavior much more carefully.
“Sigh… I’m so disappointed in you, Sansui,” Lady Douve says, visibly annoyed.
After finishing her critiques of me, her expression takes on a look of sadness, as though she’d lost some meaning in her life.
“I don’t even want to see your face. Go out for a while. Yes… Tahlan’s waiting with Saiga and the others near the academy. Why not go see them? Perhaps those other men will be able to reassure you about that embarrassingly injured face.”
With that, Lady Douve falls silent. It seems she doesn’t even want to talk to me anymore. My master and I exchange glances and, in the end, decide to leave Lady Douve’s estate.
As Lady Douve suggested, we decided to go visit the open air salle by the academy. There, my students and Ran, Tahlan, and Saiga are practicing, but…
“What happened, Sansui?!”
“Yes, what happened, Master Sansui?!”
“Whoa, seriously?! You… HURT?! WHY?!”
All three of them are more surprised at my being hurt than at my looking like an adult. The other students are also all in a confused panic after seeing my bandage. Even though they all got injured during practice, it seemed that they couldn’t believe that I could get hurt at all.
“Mm… I gave him some instruction… And, well, I split his forehead,” my master explains apologetically. It seems that even my master hadn’t thought everyone considered me this unbeatable. As I’ve been caught off guard, there was no way my master, less aware of the situation than myself, could ever have known.
After a pause, Tahlan speaks up first.
“With all respect, Master Suiboku… Why did you instruct Master Sansui in that manner?”
Having sensed that my master had purposefully injured me, rather than it being a wound that I’d suffered due to my own mistake, Tahlan straightened his posture and explained his inquiry.

“I can’t believe that a man of your ability would hurt your student without meaning, Master Suiboku.”
It’s not that I’m actually hurt, it’s just that there’s blood seeping from my forehead wound. This hardly counts as an injury in sword practice.
Still, it seems that Tahlan believes that there had been a higher purpose behind this wound. That is true not just of Tahlan, but of Saiga and the others, as well. Everyone is getting far too worked up over the fact that I’d shed a little blood.
“Yes, there was a reason,” my master replies. He definitely isn’t making excuses. His explanation will be particularly important to those present here.
“Tahlan, you were able to read and avoid my brother’s Flash Step, were you not?”
“I was only able to roll around on the ground in an embarrassing fashion and somehow save my own life in the process.”
“When I saw that, I was extremely surprised. Even if you had been aware of how Flash Step worked, I didn’t think you’d be able to move so confidently,” my master says, praising Tahlan. He seemed to even feel a certain amount of awe as he expressed his heartfelt opinion. “Even though you had been trained by my apprentice, I didn’t think you could fight my friend, who had after all obtained such incredible heights. I believe you will be able to land a blow upon my apprentice in the near future.”
Tahlan pauses again before replying, “You honor me.”
“The same goes for you, Ran, and you, Saiga. You were both very strong. While your forms were incomplete, you both have promising futures of infinite possibility.”
Ran and Saiga both blush at my master’s praise. It isn’t just flattery or for show; he really is genuinely praising them for their skill. That’s why Tahlan and the others seemed so pleased. And, of course, my master is pleased at being able to praise them.
“The issue is…my apprentice was content with that fact.”
My master glares harshly at me.
“Tahlan. My apprentice was too content at seeing your growth and Saiga’s. He accepted that such growth was sufficient, and felt that he had nothing else to do.”
“W-What… What does that mean?”
“This fool had convinced himself that he should focus upon service while he was in the mortal world. He had accepted that, because he had much left to learn, it was fine if you caught up to him. He felt content with not being fully trained while you lived, and that he could simply return to the forest where I resided and resume his training once you had all died.”
It seems that Tahlan and the others are shocked to hear that.
“It was the height of dishonorable behavior. At the very least, I would have felt insulted to learn that.”

As I look about uncomfortably, everyone seems sad. As my master had stated, I had been dishonoring them as their sword instructor.
“You sought to become the strongest and had attained it, and you were praised as the greatest. Know that to honor others, your duty is to continue to seek new heights. Don’t take your long life for granted and act the part of the generous old man. To do otherwise is equivalent to looking down upon your students.”
It is a harsh critique, probably the harshest words that my master has ever said to me.
“…Master Sansui.”
As the representative of those present, Tahlan kneels before me. Such an obeisance should have been unthinkable to Tahlan, a man of royal blood.
“I faced Master Suiboku’s brother apprentice. My strength was lacking, and the most I could do on my own was to defend myself, but… Without your teachings, Master Sansui, I probably wouldn’t have been able to achieve even that. It was thanks to your instruction that I was able to fight in that battle.”
Master Suiboku’s fellow apprentice, his brother apprentice… I hadn’t had the opportunity to meet him, but no doubt he had been extremely strong. Tahlan had been able to fight such an opponent. He was able to hold his own, all by himself. For Tahlan, who has no special talents beyond his Art, it must be something that he is extremely proud of. If Tahlan had attained that strength because of my training, then that was something I can be extremely proud of, as well.
“Master Sansui, the sword skills that you inherited from Master Suiboku are extraordinary. Having had the fortune of witnessing Master Suiboku fight, I became further excited to receive your instruction, Master Sansui.”
Tahlan exudes the same sadness that Lady Douve had shown. He had been deeply saddened to learn that I had been hurt, that I had accepted the possibility of losing, that I had given up the idea of getting stronger during this time I was with them all.
“Master Sansui… Please, I beg you. Don’t simply guide us by the hand, but also move forward yourself. We want you to be the wall that stands before us in this age that we live in!”
I don’t even need to read their auras to notice that all the students are looking at me. They gaze upon me pleadingly, putting their wishes forward with the force of their eyes. They look like they want to believe that I remain the greatest swordsman.
“Please don’t already be looking forward to the day that we’ve all died and gone!”
It’s a plea filled with pain, and I’m the one who’s hurting them.
If my master hadn’t appeared in front of me, would I have lost some day to Tahlan or Saiga? Would I have been sincerely happy at having conceded to them? Perhaps that happiness would be my own, but it would not be a joyful thing for them.

“If there is such a thing as good fortune for a swordsman, it’s to be blessed with a good teacher.”
I kneel and match Tahlan’s gaze.
“And if there is such a thing as good fortune for an instructor, it is to be blessed by good apprentices and to raise them. I have been blessed in both ways.”
I had been so content with each day, I had been so content in myself, that I had forgotten the bare minimum that was expected of me. My master hadn’t simply been instructing me, but had also continued to heighten his own skills. I had forgotten that obvious fact.
“I am extremely fond of all of you. You are all so honest and serious and dedicated. I love watching you train so earnestly. I was proud to see you be praised by society under my instruction, in the service of His Lordship.”
I need to be strong.
“I took it all for granted because I am Master Suiboku’s apprentice, because I am your master, and above all because I am a long-lived Immortal... I took it all for granted and forgot to be a swordsman, first and foremost.”
I take Tahlan’s hand and help him up, then look to Saiga. I look at the man who is, without a doubt, one day going to become the strongest, the man who has the greatest possibility of defeating me. The man who had once been so unwilling to accept that he couldn’t defeat me now wants me to be strong above all else.
“I will...become even stronger. Will you continue to pursue me?”
“Yes!”
To be depended upon is a great burden, but it’s also extraordinarily fulfilling. It is probably at this moment that I finally properly understand what my responsibilities are.
“Master Suiboku. I ask for your instruction once more.”
“My training is harsh. Do prepare yourself.”
“Yes, sir.”
I will become stronger now, in the present. There is nothing so blessed, so lucky.
“Then let us have another practice duel. All of you, watch carefully. A duel between those who have achieved No Doubt is something even Immortals rarely witness!”
My master draws his wooden sword.
“Come, Sansui! Don’t you dare embarrass yourself before your master and your apprentices!”
“Understood, Master.”
I also draw my sword.
“I will challenge you with all of my skill.”
At the same time, I feel the auras around me focus. My master and I are about to start a true test of our skills. A battle between the master who had completely mastered the sword, and I, his chosen apprentice. Just being able to watch such a fight makes everyone around me tense.

“I took a long, indirect path to teaching Sansui. Do you understand why? It’s because those in the state of No Doubt can deal with their opponents however they may please. Even if I showed myself fighting your average swordsman…if Sansui had yet to achieve that state, it would just make the opponent look weak, and he wouldn’t grasp the essence of my strength.”
I think back to the recent practice duel against my master. I had clashed blades with my master, but how long had it been since I had been able to actually engage in a proper practice duel that way? No, it might have been the first time that had happened in my life. No doubt that was true of my master, as well. Even the Immortal who had recently challenged my master wouldn’t have been an actual challenge.
“I’ll throw all of my strength at Sansui. My apprentice should be able to stand up to it. I have already confirmed that he can.”
This is an instructional display that only works because my master and I are both here. With the two of us together, we can show everyone what true mastery of battle looks like. We can show what is usually simply restricted to our imaginations and exchange blows with one another.
“Now, focus and witness! The fruits of our training!”
My master and I joyfully cross blades. This practice duel can only happen because my master had spent centuries mastering the art of battle, and because I have inherited that mastery. Everyone present can’t help but feel an excitement, a depth of emotion, raw tension, and anticipation at being able to witness such a battle.

Part 17 — Days

And so, I was able to engage in very meaningful training. I sparred with my master until the sun set in front of my many students. It goes without saying, but my master and I didn’t actually land our blows. This was done out of consideration for me, to avoid hurting me further, given that I had been chastised for being wounded earlier.
It’s probably odd for me to say, but I feel like I had finally been able to engage in training that was worthy of a swordsman. Up until now I’ve told other swordsmen that I had only trained through practice swings, but now I can finally tell them that I’ve also sparred properly in practice duels. I can’t imagine that they’ll accept that logic, but at least I am now able to move past only having trained through practice swings.
I return to Lady Douve’s estate feeling a pleasant sense of fatigue and relate my day to my wife and daughter.
“You know, it sounds odd for me to even say it, but it’s been a long time since I’ve gotten hungry after a long day of activity. And thanks to that, even my second dinner feels particularly delicious.”
Blois, Lain, and I are having dinner in a small room. Of course the meal is bread-based rather than a Japanese-style rice-based meal, but even then, it’s fulfilling to eat.

“You might yell at me for saying this, but I feel like I’ve been rejuvenated in both body and soul!”
I feel like a high school athlete. I can’t remember at all if I had done anything like this when I was actually a student, but I’m really enjoying life now.
Both Lain and Blois pause at this before replying.
“Huh, Papa, you’re... Um, normal.”
“Yeah... He seems like a normal man.”
“You know, I suppose I was aware of it to some extent... But was I really that strange up until now?”
It seems that I am just simply eating dinner while simply describing my day and simply enjoying the moment appears quite “normal” to them. What they meant by that observation was that up until now, I hadn’t been normal at all.
“Yup, you were strange.”
“Yes, you were strange.”
My wife and daughter both agree that I had been strange up to this point. It’s probably weird for me to say it about myself, but I guess I had been correct to think of myself as being outside the norm.
“I see... Is it strange to see me be normal?”
“Not at all! It’s very nice to see you being normal!”
“That’s right! It’s much better!”
“I-I see...”
They had said this over lunch as well, but evidently they prefer me as I am right now. It’s just as I’d thought... My ordinary demeanor is terrible.
“Wow, Master Suiboku is amazing to be able to make even Papa this normal!”
“Yes. That Golden Balm medicine is amazing!”
Having them thoroughly praise my appearance and mental state, both of which I had obtained through the medicinal use of Golden Balm, almost feels like a rejection of who I normally am. If I think about it positively, I guess it’s like a fat man losing weight.
Even though Lain loves her Papa, she considered him being fat his one downside. For her, it’s as though Papa has lost weight, I guess. If she had actually hated me to begin with, it wouldn’t have mattered if I had lost weight or taken on an adult form; even with that change, she wouldn’t like me anyway.
“It’s not just the effects of the medicine. It’s also because I’ve seen Master Suiboku for the first time in a long time and was able to remember that I’m still his apprentice. I guess it’s unavoidable that you get a little more childlike when you meet someone who’s done a lot for you.”
Many people, starting with Lady Douve, were displeased that I’d gotten hurt. I bear the reputation of House Sepaeda on my shoulders, after all. Even if I had been fighting my master, I shouldn’t have let myself be

injured. Even if I couldn't have avoided it, I should have at least kept that injury from becoming common knowledge.
Perhaps I should have taken steps to hide my injury. I think if I had been in my usual state, I would have been able to think that far ahead. On the other hand, perhaps not. At the very least, I know that I hadn't been in my usual frame of mind.
"Say, Papa! Since you're grown up, does that mean you can make babies?"
Honestly, I don't think it's normal to ask about making babies at the dinner table. I suppose I can't talk much about being normal, but perhaps I should lecture Lain anyway. But, no, it would be a bit wrong to do that at this late hour.
"No, I'm tired today, so I'm going to go to sleep. I'm so very tired... I just want to go straight to bed."
"...Huh?"
As I tell my daughter what I really feel, Blois looks extremely surprised. In fact, she's staring at me as though she can't believe what I'd just said.
"S-Sansui? Did you just say you wanted to sleep? You're going to bed? In the normal sense of the term?"
"..."
I almost say, "Yup, that's right." I think it's good to be honest, but even I can tell it would be a bad idea to just tell her that I'm sleepy.
Obviously, Blois doesn't want to hear me complain that I'm sleepy. She isn't asking a question, she's voicing an objection to my decision.
Honestly, I'm really quite sleepy, so I do want to go straight to bed. But...I can sleep anytime I want. Shouldn't I try to fulfill her wishes as part of paying respect to those who live in the here and now?
"...I'm going to bathe in some cold water."
"Yes, go do that!"
"That's right, Papa! The night's still young!"
After finishing my meal, I decide to go to the well and pour some water on myself. I really am tired enough that if I let my guard down for even a moment, I'll fall right over, but even I can tell that such a slip would be unforgivable. Fortunately, the water from the well is plenty cold. Once I've poured it over my head, I'm sure I'll wake up a little bit.
"...No, it's not working."
Since I had regained some of the senses of a mortal, it had completely slipped my mind, but since I'm an Immortal, I don't actually feel anything from getting splashed by cold water. Honestly, I doubt I'd feel any more alert if I splash myself with boiling-hot water, which means cold water is right out. Even if I were to dive right into a big pool, I imagine I'd probably just fall asleep after hitting the water.
"I didn't expect this as a side effect..."
Still, I had been able to stay awake despite being sleepy several times up to this point. I'm sure I can avoid falling asleep right now. However, my fatigue is clouding my ability to think. I'm just...really, truly tired. It seems

like my daily rhythm has reverted to where it had been in the past, simply because I've reunited with my master.
"No, it's times like this that call for calm. I guess I'll practice."
I draw my wooden sword and start taking practice swings on the spot. I'm sure a little exercise will remove my drowsiness. As I continue swinging my wooden sword with that thought in mind, though, I happen to notice something.
Blois, who is still inside the estate, has fallen asleep. With my ability to read auras, there was no way I'd miss that. As such, the moment I realize Blois was asleep, I find myself wide awake. I walk quietly into her room and tiptoe toward her, where I find her asleep with a bottle of wine on the table next to her, along with two glasses.
Meanwhile, Blois herself is dressed in her most seductive finery. Based on the circumstances, I'd guess that she worked herself up into a lather while preparing for an adult evening with me. She'd had a glass of wine to calm herself and had promptly gotten drunk, then fell asleep on her chair.
"…Blois."
I can't help but see myself in her as she sits sleeping in her chair, head resting against her arms on the table. Why is it that we're just so bad at doing things other than fighting? How do normal people manage to do these things so well?
When I think about it that way, I feel a tenderness toward her that I hadn't before. I'm quite certain it's not quite a romantic feeling, but I still want to make her happy. We're pretty socially inept, and even our best efforts don't always produce results, but I can't help but think there's not actually anything wrong with that.
"I didn't know that you can't hold your liquor. Maybe you didn't know about that yourself either."
It's not possible to dash up the ladder to adulthood. I still have plenty of failings and that is true of Blois as well.
"Let's grow up together, Blois."
I gently pick Blois — no, I gently pick my wife up, and carry her to the bed. Afterward, I settle in next to her and gaze at her expression of contentment as I drift off to sleep.
I wake up the next morning and immediately take stock of my surroundings. This isn't an inn on our journey, nor is it the Wynne family home. I wake up next to Blois in her room at Lady Douve's estate.
When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is Blois's face. To see the same face when I wake up that I saw going to sleep…there is a powerful little kernel of happiness in that.
"…Sansui?"
Blois, who has evidently just woken up, notices my presence even through her drowsy haze.
"…?!"
Her cheeks immediately flush beet red and she sits up with a start.

“Good morning, Blois,” I say, sitting up as I greet her. It seems that she has drawn the wrong conclusion, so I decide to start out by correcting that misunderstanding.
“Blois, I’m sorry to have caused a misunderstanding, but…”
“S-Sansui…!”
Blois’s eyes go wide and she becomes a bit excitable, breathing heavily through her nose.
“Wait, hold on, let me explain. I’m the one who set things up this confusingly…”
“I-I don’t recall much of the evening, but…! We finally crossed that line, right?!”
“Blois, calm down. We haven’t.”
“T-To my everlasting shame…I honestly don’t remember it well. I feel like I dreamed a particularly pleasant dream. But it wasn’t a dream, was it?!”
“No, that was a dream.”
“O-Oh… Then…our first time…”
“It hasn’t happened yet. Calm down.”
I try desperately to calm the thoroughly worked-up Blois.
“H-How was it?!”
Her eyes wide, she seems to be under the mistaken impression that it had actually happened and that she just doesn’t remember it properly. Unfortunately, that’s completely wrong. There’s nothing for her to remember in the first place.
“…First.”
“First what?!”
I decide to start from the beginning and explain it to her in detail. It’ll be a bit of a detour, but I’m sure it’ll get the point across eventually.
“Remember that I went outside to splash some cold water on myself after dinner? I was really sleepy.”
“Y-Yeah! That’s right! Then I came to my room to wait for you, readying things for your return! Since you’ve grown up, I got some wine to celebrate the occasion!”
Now that I think about it, can Immortals even get drunk on normal alcohol? I’m a bit skeptical, but that’s not a particularly important detail.
“I got really nervous and I had a glass of wine! I-I don’t remember much after that! What happened after?!”
“We went to bed.”
“W-We went to bed?! Could you add more details?!”
It seems that we’ve taken different meanings of the phrase “went to bed.” There’s a regular, non-adult version, and then there’s the very adult version. Ordinarily if a man and a woman wake up in a bed together, the adult version is usually what happened, but in this case we actually, literally just went to sleep in the same bed.
“When I came into this room you had fallen asleep after getting drunk.”
“Huh?”

“You’d fallen asleep and were laying your head on that table there.”
“Huh?”
“So I carried you into bed and then went to sleep afterward.”
“Huh?”
“That’s it.”
“Huh?”
Since there’s nothing else to describe, I wait for her to finish processing my words.
“Wait! That’s it?! There’s nothing else to describe?”
“No, there isn’t.”
“Lain’s not here, right? Then there’s no need to be vague!”
“It’s the truth.”
“…Oh.”
It seemed she’s finally grasped the situation and has now shifted from befuddlement to anger.
“Then why would you do something that’d make me draw the wrong conclusion?! That’s so misleading!”
Well, she’s sort of got a point, but I don’t know if she’s got much of a leg to stand on, given that she’d told me to go wake up and then spent that time falling into a drunken sleep.
“…”
It seems that she’s reached the same conclusion. I’m just guessing here, but I think she’s noticed that she smells of wine. That’s probably why she pauses before continuing.
“Sansui, I’m sure I was at fault as well. But, why…why did you do something so misleading…?!”
She’s definitely embarrassed now, and her face has flushed bright red.
“For a married couple! To wake up in the same bed! Surely the natural conclusion is to think something has happened!”
“True.”
“Don’t ‘true’ me! Explain! Putting me to sleep in my own bed? Fine! But why’d you crawl in next to me?! Was it just because you were sleepy?!”
Her anger was understandable. I actually was sleepy, so I’m sure a part of me just wanted to fall asleep right then and there. But it was also true that wasn’t all of my motivation.
“Well, the truth is…”
“Yes, get on with it!”
“I wanted to fall asleep while watching you sleep.”
“O-Oh! That’s it! That was the reason… That’s perfectly fine, then! No problem at all!”
She seems to understand. Moreover, while she’s doing her best to hide it, she actually looks extremely pleased.
“If I saw you asleep, I’d probably want to fall asleep looking at your sleeping face as well! In that case, then, well… I guess I can’t blame you!”

Evidently, if she found me asleep, she'd want to fall asleep next to me too. That makes me happy too, honestly.
"Papa! Mama Blois! Did you do it?!"
An excited-looking Lain opens the door and enters the room.
"Did you make me a brother or sister?!"
I'm pretty sure she doesn't really understand what she's saying, but her question really is quite brutal in its directness. Just when Blois and I had managed to build a nice, wholesome mood, Lain comes in and wrecks it. This forces me to actually face the fact that, despite the return of my libido, somehow the two of us managed to just fall asleep last night.
"…That's right! We did!"
Blois evidently decides to just go with it and just lie to Lain, confidently smacking her own stomach to show Lain. It was both heartwarming and painful to watch. I never expected there'd come a day when Blois would be so eager to put on a false front for Lain's sake.
"Yay! So, so, did it hurt?"
"You'll know when you grow up!"
"Hey, no fair!" Lain responds with a discontented pout, even as Blois puts all her effort into fudging the answer.
I suppose you do find out when you grow up, but Blois and I haven't actually grown up yet. Though, I guess, in the sense that we're fudging the truth to a child, we have grown up a little bit. Of course, we're not adults that anyone ought to be proud of...
Once we finish with breakfast, we decide to go outside. In the estate's garden, we find Tahlan focused intently on practice swings while Lady Douve looks on. She has an expression like a mother watching her child play, and looks like an extremely warm, compassionate woman.
"Oh, Sansui, you've returned to being a child?"
"Yes. The balm's effect wore off."
"Tsk, how unbecoming…"
It seems that my usual appearance is quite the embarrassment.
"Though, in terms of being a child, Tahlan's not much better. It seems that he was overjoyed at getting to watch you and your master fight. He spent so much effort training yesterday that he immediately fell asleep in my bed," Lady Douve says with a confident chuckle, prompting Blois to look crestfallen.
Despite the fact that they had ended up in similar situations, Lady Douve is able to share it as a funny little anecdote rather than be ashamed by it. Blois must feel the gap between herself and Lady Douve as women based on that display alone.
I, too, am painfully aware of the gap between Tahlan and I as men as well. The reason Lady Douve is so confident must be because this isn't something that happens often. Tahlan's usual behavior is what gives Lady Douve her confidence and allows her to act the part of the bigger woman.
"Ohh, Master Sansui! Thank you so much for yesterday!"

Having noticed our arrival, Tahlan approaches me, glistening with sweat. He is the very epitome of a handsome man, the sweat not detracting from but rather adding a glamorous sheen to his appearance.
“The clash of blades between Master Sansui and Master Suiboku was indeed a clash of masters. It was a show of mastery that everyone should hold as the ideal… I, Tahlan, will do all that I can to be able to match blades with you, Master Sansui!”
It’s a sincere, heartfelt admiration that he directs at me. Am I really a man worthy of the high regard that this man holds for me? I can’t help but be skeptical.
“Still. I can’t have you instruct just myself. I’m sure our fellow swordsmen have gathered at the practice grounds. Why don’t we make our way there?”
“…Yes, of course. That’s my role, after all.”
Yes, I’m still a sword instructor, and I have no other way to show my appreciation for Tahlan and the others than through instruction in the sword. Tahlan’s opinion of me is fine. It’s something I should be proud of. The real issue is how I deal with Blois and Lain.
“Then why don’t we accompany them, Blois, Lain?”
“Y-Yes, of course… I’m sure Master Suiboku will be there as well.”
“Yeah, we need to get more medicine.”
It seems Lain has a particular fixation on keeping me in an adult form. Evidently my usual appearance isn’t something I should be proud of.
There are a large number of people gathered at the salle near the academy. It’s an overwhelming number, far more than the usual crowd. In fact, there are so many people here that my students are now in the minority. I think most of them are challengers here to face me, but why are there suddenly so many of them here?
“…You’ve finally arrived.”
His Brothership is already present, looking faintly irate. I’m sure I’m the cause of his irritation.
“Sansui, I’m told that you were injured yesterday in a sparring session with Master Suiboku.”
“Yes.”
“…Not only that, but I’m told you showed your injured face to the public.”
“Yes…”
“For the love of… Well, that’s the reason.”
Oh dear, so my injury is why there are so many people here. Evidently they had thought I was invincible, but learning that I could bleed, they’d decided to challenge me again.
“I’m a warrior as well, and I know students don’t feel any shame when they get hurt while sparring with their masters. However, you must pay a little more attention to appearances. You’re a swordsman of House Sepaeda, and you carry the House’s reputation on your shoulders.”
“My apologies…”

I hadn’t expected it to be this big of a deal. It hadn’t even occurred to me that this many people would act upon the knowledge that I’d been injured.
“Hahaha! Oh, this display suits you, Master Sansui! For a single one of your actions to bring such activity to the capital!”
“This isn’t a laughing matter, Tahlan. This many people can only be a nuisance to the academy.”
Tahlan laughs happily, while Lady Douve looks annoyed. For my part, I can understand her annoyance, given that there are this many people who seem to believe that they can defeat me. Putting it simply, they think they can mess with me.
“Sansui, go knock all of them out immediately. This is because of your mistake, so don’t trouble anyone else because of it.”
“Very well, milady.”
Ordinarily, I’d like to take the time to fight each of them one-on-one, but that would eat up the bulk of my day. Unlike me, other people have a finite amount of time in this world, and so there’s nothing wrong with getting this over with quickly. Motivated people will probably come back at me even if they’re beaten, so I guess I can just start by taking all of them down at once.
I once again curse my ineptness as I draw my wooden sword from my sash.
“Sansui.”
My master appears beside me. He seems amused that I had set off this much consternation through my own carelessness.
“Master Suiboku.”
“You’re a popular one, aren’t you?”
Lots of people want to challenge me, some because they want the position I occupy and some because they just want to defeat me. On the other hand, there are many people who like me, believe in me, and depend upon me.
“You’ve become a fine swordsman.”
“Thank you.”
“Now, don’t keep them waiting. Be respectful of their time.”
My master disappears from my side. Meanwhile, I get back to work.
“…I’m House Sepaeda’s combat instructor, Sansui Shirokuro.”
I turn my wooden sword toward the crowd of people that want to make a name for themselves by defeating me.
“Please, all of you, feel free to attack me.”

Side Story I — Vantage Point

“It’s finally settled down…and I’m glad we managed not to lose any countries either.”

God, who had been watching Suiboku’s candle from his seat, relaxed when he noticed that Suiboku’s flame had returned to normal. Looking upon the candles around it, it didn’t seem like there had been many victims this time around.

“When that monster goes on a rampage, we really do see a wholesale snuffing out of candles, after all.”

Whenever Suiboku’s candle flame burned intently, it would usually consume a large number of candles around it. Thousands, tens of thousands of lives, would be lost to Suiboku’s intensity. Still, that would have been fine, in a sense, if they had somehow fulfilled Suiboku’s aim. Unfortunately, such individuals couldn’t even serve as fuel for Suiboku’s efforts. The victims that had come from Suiboku’s past rampages hadn’t been necessary at all for Suiboku to obtain his current level of strength.

“…Such a waste.”

The reason why Suiboku had let go of Eckesachs and started training on his own was because he felt he hadn’t gotten any stronger despite massacring large numbers of people. If wholesale slaughter was necessary to become strong, then Suiboku would have trained Sansui by sending him off on such a rampage. Just destroying things in a rage didn’t make you stronger. How many people had died before Suiboku had realized that one simple fact?

“Well, we can’t bring back what’s been lost. I suppose it’s not worthy of a god to complain so much about what had already happened. What’s more important is what’ll happen next…”

God already knew what was going to happen in this world.

“If Suiboku was to fight in earnest, then the coming threats would probably die without being able to do anything, but I doubt he’ll trouble himself to actually fight them at this point…”

The world’s people were soon going to face an existential threat, a threat where the Eight Sacred Treasures that God had created would finally fulfill their true purpose. The terrifying reality was that Suiboku would have been able to defeat that threat on his own, but God couldn’t rely upon him to do it.

“Well… I suppose it’s a mistake to think of Immortals as humans in the first place. The most I can hope for is that they’ll offer clues about ordinary humans…”

Of course, if God were to ask Suiboku directly, he might very well accept. But that would be going too far, directly interfering in a way that He wasn’t supposed to do with the mortal world.

“Oh well… I decided what abilities humans would have when I created everything. It would be an insult to this world’s people if I were to suddenly

intervene directly and change things… I may be the one who manages this world, but it’s not as though it’s my world to do with as I please.”
God was preparing simply to watch over the world, hoping that things would go well.
Far to the east of the Arcana Kingdom, past the Domino Republic and countless other countries, at the eastern edge of the world there was a group of islands floating in the air. It was a land that had once been known as Hanafuda and was now called the Eight Great Provinces. In that land there were many Immortals and mortals living out their days.
Among those people was a particularly old Immortal known by the name of Kacho, who stared outward with a sense of resignation. Sitting near the base of an enormous tree, a boy had been meditating nearby when the Immortal master had detected the inevitable outcome of a far-off battle.
“So Fukei has come to an end.”
“Huh? Master Fukei lost?!”
Hearing Kacho’s words, the young man who had been sitting nearby showed astonishment that his brother apprentice had lost.
“I can’t believe that Master Fukei would ever lose! He was considered the most powerful warrior, a man without equal, here in the Eight Great Provinces. Did he really lose?!”
“The outcome was pretty much inevitable. He was facing the wrong opponent. He stood no chance, not against Suiboku, who split apart this land when it was called Hanafuda over three thousand years ago. But I’m not sad that he lost, nor that he died.”
“Wait, the fact that he died is plenty sad! I mean, he was very good to me even during my mortal days, while you, Master Kacho, must have known him for even longer…”
“He lived for over forty-five hundred years. There’s nothing sad about his life coming to an end. What makes me grieve is that he didn’t accept his mistakes until the very end.”
Fukei hadn’t been able to place himself in the right state of mind as an Immortal until it was too late. Kacho had worried that Fukei was going to end up that way for over four thousand years. Ultimately, that worry hadn’t prevented his apprentice from coming to the very end he had feared would happen.
“While there’s no inherent meaning to a tree growing, there is a reason for it. That is the same for the stones shaped by rivers. Because Fukei was too close to Suiboku, a being that had set aside his humanity, Fukei, too, sought to put aside his humanity.”
Suiboku had grown into an extraordinary power simply by being as he always had been. Fukei, who just happened to be near him, had been continually eclipsed by his shadow. Because Fukei had been corrupted to his core by this proximity, he continued to be affected by Suiboku even long after Suiboku had departed.

Fukei had spent his life battling Suiboku's shadow and influence. The fact that he had been locked in constant internal battle with his rival meant that he had also been in a state of continual suffering. And, in the end, Fukei couldn't continue to bear that suffering.

"I was a failure as a teacher. Because I adored Suiboku, I let him act with too much freedom, while my concern for Fukei meant that I continually bombarded him with words."

"You bombarded him with words... You spent too much time lecturing him?"

"Indeed, that's correct. I did that despite knowing that words are merely words, not actually teachings... No doubt I made a mistake in raising the two of them."

It had been three thousand years since Suiboku had split Hanafuda asunder. Almost all of the Immortals that had instructed Suiboku had already become one with nature. Kacho was the last remaining, only tied to this world by regret. He felt an unbreakable urge to watch his two apprentices go to their inevitable ends. That was all over now. Tragically, the end that he had foreseen the moment Suiboku arrived in this land four thousand years ago had finally arrived.

"Words can be interpreted however the hearer wishes to interpret them. Just as the Immortal Arts can be used any way the wielder wishes, my words, in the end, never reached Fukei's heart."

"What do you mean?"

"An Immortal is one who has stopped consuming the five staple grains and focuses upon their pursuits. Is that not so?"

"Well, sure."

"But it's not as though an Immortal can't consume the five staples, nor are they incapable of doing so. There's no rule that says an Immortal who's eaten the five staples is to be exiled, is there?"

"Well, of course not!"

Immortals had no need to eat and gluttony was only an obstacle to training. But so long as it was in moderation, many Immortals continued to consume food. To state that no one who consumes the five staple grains is an Immortal showed a complete lack of understanding of Immortals in general.

"What's important is their heart, their state of mind... That's what you always teach, master!"

"Yes...and it's not a simple matter to change one's heart or mind with words. But just because one is forced to emulate an Immortal's actions through the act of training, that doesn't mean they'll also acquire the right frame of mind."

For example, say there's training that involves sitting in front of a tree. By engaging in that act, the disciple learns discipline and dedication. But that doesn't mean that action allows them to fulfill the goal of becoming one with nature, of feeling and understanding themselves as part of nature. Has the disciple actually learned discipline, or are they simply engaging in training to fulfill their goal of getting revenge? While the difference in

motivations will manifest in reality, disciples who can't come to the right answer will never be able to tell the difference.
"Fukei was extremely serious and dedicated. He admired the Immortals around him, respected them, and wanted to emulate them. That was fine, but he viewed that alone as the answer to his quest. He had convinced himself, wrongly, that it was sufficient to emulate their forms and their techniques."
A Fallen Immortal who had lived for forty-five hundred years was, in essence, an Immortal who had wasted forty-five hundred years by living in error. Fukei had been convinced beyond doubt that Suiboku had fallen and become an evil being, and he had used that as a justification for becoming a Fallen Immortal himself, but that had been the wrong conclusion to draw.
"It's true that Suiboku acted in ways that were far from those of a typical Immortal, but there was no evil or malice in Suiboku's heart. At his core, he was actually a well-intentioned man. That was why we competed to teach him new techniques."
"…Um, but wasn't that what brought upon that issue?"
"By 'that issue,' do you mean the shattering of Hanafuda? Even at the time, the only ones who struggled to deal with it were the young ones. We, the fully trained Immortals, were, in fact, pleased with the outcome. After all, all that had happened was that island had been split in several pieces."
Kacho and many Immortals hadn't chastised Suiboku, dismissing the shattering of the island as inconsequential. The reason was simply that none of them actually cared about what had happened.
Despite that, Fukei had been enraged. As though to say that he had no desire to cower before a monster, a force of nature, like Suiboku, and that he would make Suiboku pay for his crime. Given the justification that he was acting to punish someone who had committed a great crime, Fukei happily began piling up his hatred of his rival apprentice.
"Suiboku may have been unconventional, but at his core he was still an Immortal. That was why everyone was happy to teach him their techniques. The reason why other Immortals taught Fukei, however, was out of pity."
"That's pretty terrible…"
"Fukei wanted desperately to view Suiboku as his inferior. Because Suiboku was so far removed from an ordinary Immortal, he wasn't able to view him as right or as a good Immortal."
"Did he really need to accept that Suiboku was a good Immortal?"
"I don't know about martial arts, but the Immortal Arts are not a competition. Immortals simply don't care about how much another Immortal has mastered their martial arts or their Immortal Arts. The true path of an Immortal is to heighten one's self, and that was where Fukei went wrong."
Immortals needed to live a life without desire and to control themselves at all times, avoiding involvement with the mortal world. Why? Because to do otherwise would lead to them becoming a Fallen Immortal.

To put it another way, however, so long as one didn't fall, there was no need for an Immortal to control oneself, nor to avoid contact with the mortal world. If an Immortal was capable of engaging in training, regardless of their circumstances, then that was still the proper path for an Immortal.
To Immortals beyond a certain level, if no longer restraining oneself or getting involved in mortal society was enough to lose oneself and fall, then that was simply a sign that they needed more training. While drowning in lust could be the cause of an Immortal's fall, not all Immortals who engaged in such relationships were fallen.
In general, it wasn't as though Immortals shared an absolute set of laws among them, nor was there any established set of punishments that they enforced for each infraction. In that sense, Immortals were free, and they were expected to take responsibility for their own choices. They would be forgiven with a laugh even if they were to destroy the floating island that everyone lived on and they would be forgiven for chasing after the one who destroyed the island and killing them. There were no absolute rules that dictated the interactions between Immortals.
Immortals had a certain type of lifestyle and many Immortals arrived at their habits quite naturally. However, that lifestyle wasn't absolute. It was simply that most Immortals lived that way, and there was no rule that stated it was the only way for an Immortal to live, or that no other lifestyle was acceptable.
Fukei, who had been obsessed with maintaining the forms and had turned the Immortal way into an object of veneration, had simply convinced himself that there were right and wrong ways to be an Immortal. Of course, others tried to persuade him of his error, but Fukei was never able to get away from his mindset that there was an absolute "right" way of being an Immortal.
"Of course, in the end, all of it stems from Fukei's choices and Suiboku's failings. There's no misunderstanding or tragedy in that. They had each contributed to the reasons for this outcome, and there was no malicious intent involved on either side."
"So you mean to dismiss it as being inevitable?"
"Indeed. The reality is that there was nothing to be done about it."
Yes, there was nothing to be done. With that one statement, Kacho had given up and accepted all that had happened.
"Thinking back upon it, perhaps there were far too many forebears to serve as an example here. The fact that it was an environment suited to learning was what made Suiboku so powerful and made Fukei so obsessive. Teaching and guiding aren't necessarily always the same thing. Perhaps Suiboku has finally recognized that fact."
"Uhm…What do you mean?"
"In Suiboku's case, even if no one had taught him, no doubt he would have just acquired power in his own way. No doubt that would have taken longer than it did when we taught him. Both Suiboku and Fukei were able to take

shortcuts by using our instruction. But, if all that's saved by taking those shortcuts is time, then maybe it's better to take the longer path. That's particularly true when it comes to the heart."
Kacho, the Immortal who had lived for ages, took the time to explain at length to the young man who was likely going to be his final apprentice. He described in detail the regrets he held for the two apprentices he had raised with his own two hands.
"There is a meaning to struggling and striving, to thinking about problems, and coming to your own answers. It allows you to learn and grow, mentally and emotionally, in a way that you cannot by simply taking the right answers that have been prepared for you."
"So is that why you haven't taught me much in the way of techniques? Is it to correct that error?"
"No, that's just because you're lacking in talent. Besides, it's only been about a hundred years since you became my apprentice."
"O-Oh."
In the end, it was all in the past. No one had been forced or controlled into doing anything. They had all simply followed their own hearts. No matter how predictable and tragic the outcome, Kacho's vigil over his two apprentices was almost at an end.
"Soon, Suiboku will come back to this land. That will be when my last regret tying me to this world will end. I will finally be able to leave this world and go join my friends."
"...Um, Master Kacho. What about me?"
"...Guess I'll leave you to Suiboku."
"Master Kacho?! That's awful! You'd completely forgotten about me, hadn't you?! You don't have any regrets about me at all?!"
"Well, I'm sure you'll reach enlightenment even if I leave you to yourself."
"Besides, isn't Master Suiboku the one with all the awful stories, like the one where he peed on Master Fukei's head?!"
"Indeed."
"Don't 'indeed' that away! Did he really do those things?! They weren't exaggerations?!"
"He was only about five hundred years old or so at the time... He was still immature by Immortal standards..."
"That's still only the sort of thing five-year-olds or the like do! I really don't want to be apprenticed to someone like that!"
Soon, the man who had found the cows of enlightenment would come to this land. He would bring the apprentice he was so proud of and return to the land where he had accumulated so many of his failings. That meant the end of a particular Immortal.
"Well, yes... Suiboku would do things like step on Fukei's head, slam his head against a boulder, knock him out and toss him off the island, throw him in the ocean after paralyzing him with needles, bury him in the ground and surround him with rocks, crush him with giant snowballs... Yes, he did

do all sorts of terrible things, but I’m sure he’s now become a proper Immortal. I’m certain of it.”
“I really don’t want a master like that! Wait, Master Kacho, you and the other Immortals really didn’t stop him?!”
“…We all thought it was cute and laughed about it.”
“There, that’s it! That’s what you should be most ashamed of!”
Could it be that this master was the one who was the worst out of all them? Zen, the young Immortal, couldn’t help but feel anxious about his master’s ability to teach.
“…I see. I suppose this is what it means to learn wisdom from the mouth of babes. There’s no end to training, I suppose.”
“…This is why Immortals this old can be such a problem.”

Side Story II — Sedition

Magyan Tahlan and Magyan Sunae, prince and princess, born from the same mother. The two siblings had reunited in a far-off land and, after witnessing a battle between two great Immortals and reuniting with Sansui, the two of them now met without any others present. They weren't hiding anything, they just wanted to confirm what they had to do as royals who had left their homeland behind.

"Sunae, your man really has grown."

Tahlan made certain to refer to Saiga as Sunae's man. It was his way of being thoughtful for his sister.

"I'm sure you saw it as well, but... In the final part of our battle with Fukei, he pushed you and the others away, while he pulled Ran and I forward. He behaved admirably."

When Tahlan spoke of Saiga's growth, he wasn't just praising Saiga's increased strength. Saiga hadn't given an inch despite facing off against a powerful and invincible Immortal. Even when it appeared there was no chance of victory, Saiga tried to fulfill his role to the last. That was something that Tahlan could do nothing but praise without reservation.

"Honestly, I had my reservations at first, but... Now I'm sure Father will accept him."

"P-Please tell that to Saiga himself! I'm sure he'd be happy to hear that!"

"Of course, I intend to tell him later. But...he only managed to accomplish all of this because you were by his side."

Saiga had lost to Sansui three separate times. Despite witnessing his humiliating defeats, Sunae stayed by his side. Of course, Saiga's growth was because he hadn't broken or given up after those losses, but even then, Sunae had kept her word as well. Tahlan was certain that Sunae's companionship had helped Saiga grow into the man he'd become.

"And I'm the same... I was able to meet a lovely woman."

"I-Indeed?"

Tahlan's expression took on one of contentment, as though he'd finally found his home, even as Sunae felt the urge to object. After all, Tahlan's partner was Douve Sepaeda. Even Sunae, who had been raised as royalty, couldn't help but find Douve unpleasant.

Meanwhile, Tahlan was the best man in three kingdoms. Even putting aside her bias as his younger sister, Sunae was certain that he was the best man in the world. After all, many princesses had sought Tahlan's hand in marriage. It was objective proof of his qualities.

"To not understand her charm... You're still a child, Sunae."

"I-I don't think that's the issue..."

If growing older was what made one appreciate Douve's charms, then Sunae was perfectly content being a child.

"Heh... I'm sure Father would understand."

"Are you sure?"

“Of course. But…I’m concerned about Mother.”
The reason the siblings from the Magyan royal family could travel abroad was that they had many half-siblings. Sunae had a claim to the throne, but she wasn’t considered to be a promising candidate. Everyone had been certain that the king would come from among the other half-siblings.
That was why there was no issue for the kingdom if the two of them weren’t present. But for their mother, it was an enormous issue. After all, Tahlan and Sunae were the only children that their mother had. That Sunae had decided not to contest the throne meant that their mother had no hope of fulfilling her ambition to be the mother of the next ruler.
“…My apologies, Big Brother. I shouldn’t have left the kingdom.”
“No point in apologizing to me. Besides, I left the kingdom just as you did. We’re each just as guilty of wandering off, despite being royals.”
While they spoke rather formally to one another, it was still a friendly, affectionate conversation between siblings. Because they were close, the siblings wanted their family to celebrate the fact that they’d found marriage partners.
“Well then, shall we go home and be the subject of lectures together? Let us return to our beloved Magyan, taking our partners with us.”
But even they couldn’t imagine what was brewing in their homeland.
“You haven’t found Tahlan yet?”
“My apologies. It seems he has traveled to a far-off country…”
“Spare me your excuses. Time is running short.”
Magyan Sukrin, the First Queen of the Magyan Kingdom. She was the mother of Sunae and Tahlan and the most powerful of Magyan Khan’s wives. Her eyes were bloodshot as she looked harshly down upon her subordinate.
“If we don’t hurry…they’ll end up choosing the next king.”
Although she had received the king’s favor and love, she had lost her chance to become the mother of the next king. Driven by a sense of panic, she stated something that was completely out of line.
“Just where are you, Tahlan…? You should be the man who becomes the next king of this country…”
Even if he was the oldest, without the Royal Presence, Tahlan had no claim to the throne. And yet, Sukrin still spoke as though he could become king. That meant… That meant that she had no intention of obeying the law of succession.
“I’ll find you, whatever it takes…!”

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing Volume Six of *The World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman*. It is I, the author, Rokurou Akashi.

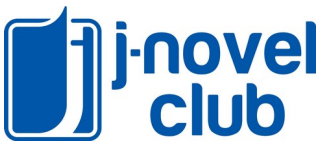
In this volume, the most powerful man in the world, Suiboku, finally got involved in the fighting. Because he fought and talked so much, my afterword has ended up as just a single page. He's so overwhelmingly strong that it even impacted the real world, putting pressure even on his author.

However, taking the time to properly write about him was one of my goals as an author. I'm extremely happy to be able to deliver the fruits of that writing to my readers. The story takes a pause here, but I'll do my best to continue delivering further stories.

I'd like to thank Shiso-sama for always providing me with lovely illustrations. I'm particularly fond of the picture of Suiboku and Fukei from back when they were training together.

Mr. Kuroda of PASH!, I'd like to thank you and ask for your continued guidance both for the novel and the manga adaptation.

-Rokurou Akashi



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